

The March Of Stan A. Solve



By Kai Nakashima

For the students of life...

Having written much of this book as a young teenager, as I finally closed on the last chapter, almost a dozen years later, I found that this book's meaning and purpose remained the same even after all this time. This book is still dedicated to those who just wanted to learn and be accepted.



Preface: Lave's Call

Young Lave Santos knelt in the gravel beside the last twelve soldiers in his troop. Under the gritty cavern eaves, they sat in utter silence for several days as one more carrier pigeon, and one more man, was gunned down above them, unable to relay their position. Trapped on enemy lines while bombs dropped from above, Lave prayed for some way out...

Day five was met with drowning terror – the explosions seized, but now every soft, shallow breath in the stagnant trench, quieted as ears were glued to the sound of advancing footfall coming from above... Should the enemy find them, it would mean imprisonment – or death.

The persevering feet stamped across the desert floor, causing sand to sprinkle from the cave ceiling onto the men's already, grime-blanketed uniforms. Soaked in sweat, Lave turned to his captain, baby-blue eyes screaming:

“The bird! The last bird! If we die, we need to let Camp Pinto know where the Hosta’s Medallion is!” He mouthed.

Lave was given a sharp nod.

“The bird’s good as dead too. We’ve already failed, boy.” The captain whispered. “I’d be sayin’ yer last words right about now... No one’s gonna know about the day Mission Medallion failed-”

“But someone needs to know! For the sake of all we’ve fought for, we can’t just leave it at this, we-”

Lave was shut up by the dirty palm whipped to his face. He came to attention instantly, and froze.

The seemingly endless noise of marching was stopped by a reeling, surprise intervention – A third party had entered the scene. A party consisting of only one man...

A pair of dusty, booted feet, appeared at the crusty opening of the gully; several men aimed their bayonet-crowned shotguns, but the captain gestured not to shoot... Yet.

All was dead silent as the pair of boots turned...

Chapter 1

A Ray Of Sundance

He was alone. He had workaholics for parents, no relatives, and no true friends. A life of private tutors and sitters, a polluted environment, and a world full of propaganda furthered his young years of being stuck indoors, entertaining himself with only books, T.V, a pet cat, and an imaginary friend named Captain Hullabaloo.

According to Jade's Mother, the world was dangerous and lustful, making the first move would be the only thing that could save you. She was a wicked business woman.

According to his Father, the world was nothing special, and therefore, neither was life. He'd disregarded passion and sentiment, making for a very stoic man of business.

Both believed the future would only survive if humanity turned to technology, which they'd made their game.

These views made the Jewel family just as unsavory as their beliefs. Saltless.

Young Jade Jewel's potential was ultimately, forgotten...

But Jade did not forget the world.

At thirteen, Jade received news that he would be sent to Donogan Academy to live in a dormitory for the next few years. He knew nothing about what kind of a life he was headed for, but his adopted perceptions of people, places, and things, had been shattered.

He could finally live.

Jade could not wait.

He planned everything. He was so ecstatic about the road that lie before him, that he reviewed it over and over in his head, how he would act, who he would be, what he would say. He wanted to make an unforgettable first impression – He would make friends, try new things, and go places he had only ever imagined. The world would be bright.

He packed his bags with a promising future dancing through his fantasies...

Jade watched his clean, boring, neighborhood of replicated houses disappear over the hill. Chemical-scented lawns and clone homes turned into dusty, brick town houses fairly quickly.

The big, yellow-cheese bus soared through layers of shabby, neglected cityscape, past apartments littered with trash, and corner stores heavy with foot traffic. He was rather taken aback by the

dilapidation of the concrete jungle; It was just as disappointing as his maddening, spotless, copycat habitat.

Further along the road became clearer, though the scenes were still employed with advertisements and obnoxious flashing signs. If the area was ritzy, it was simply more quaffed and devoid of shoddiness to the point of sterilization. However, as the bus finally swerved onto campus, the horizon became strikingly different. Jade scooted closer to the window for a good look.

The rush of grassy greens and petal-gold, went by. The regal flight of an enormous Pileated woodpecker flashed into view, just before seeing a secretive glance from a large, brown doe; which completed the enchanted forest scene. Down the bushy path was a freshly paved parking lot, scattered with pine needles and filled with sparkling cars of all types.

Pine cones – he'd never seen one in person before.

The main building was white, glassy, and elegant with Victorian tones. The doors were alive with persons entering and exiting it's manual doors. There were Starlings, Blue Jays and Cardinals on the sidewalk, getting fed by those who weren't in such a hurry.

Donogan Academy was an abundant paradise smack in the middle of an unknown little town. Surrounded by lush nature, it didn't matter to Jade the encroaching detriment, Donogan Academy already felt like a safe haven away from home.

The bus halted with an awful screech, causing Jade to plug his ears before snatching up his luggage and weaving through the crowd to get off the exhausting bus ride. The sidewalk felt like sinking sand. Passengers shoved past in order to keep things moving, but Jade hardly noticed as he tried to take it all in... Shaking off the stupor, he focused on why he was here – He was starting anew; to become himself, his real self. He put on a smile. A real one.

“Hey!” He called to a short, pale boy, who'd dyed his wild hair, silver. “Do you know where students being assigned to dorms are supposed to check in?” Jade asked, very unprofessionally.

The boy fumbled with his glasses and tugged at his mustard polo shirt. He dropped a music player into his cargo short's pocket.

“Um, yeah. I'm headed that way.” He confessed.

“Cool. Mind if I tag along?”

The kid's hesitation was defeated. For some reason, they took off in strides. Jade would have preferred to sight-see and map his memory a little more comfortably, but they continued the pace.

It was time to know the face.

“Hey, so what's your name?” Jade nosed.

“Sundance.” The boy winced proudly.

“Really? That’s an awesome name.” Jade popped. “My name is Jade.”

“Uh, cool,” Sundance peeped. “like, as in the stone?”

“Yeah.”

Sundance was embarrassed to have initiated such small talk. This interesting kid sporting a snazzy, bright-red jacket, probably already thought he was a loser... But in truth, Jade already thought they were friends.

They rounded a marigold bed, percolating with orange, gold, and crimson, then entered thick, wooden, white, double-doors; before they could get through the second set, an alarm went berserk.

Like a lizard changing color, Sundance flushed, dropping his suitcases, deliberately throwing his hands in the air. Jade did the same, but chuckled like it was a game. He of course knew, they’d done nothing wrong.

A teen, female, corn silk-blond, with hazel eyes and fair skin, stood on the other side of the window glass, looking amused. She gestured with a glossy, french-manicure. They sneaked inside.

“They’re doing a security test, sorry you had to be the guinea pigs.” The girl explained.

“Well they don’t have to scare the pants off us!” Sundance adjusted his glasses.

“That *would* be scary.” She half-scoffed, half-laughed. She turned to Jade, trying not to look him up and down.

Jade was also fair-skinned, but he had chocolate eyes and hair so rich, one may have said there was this golden sheen about these things. His slightly almond eyes were dark, but they caught the light in such a way one could clearly see his pupils, giving that “shocked” expression blue eyes often gave. Over all, Jade was a handsome young man, preferring to keep his clothes simple; denim jeans, plain T-shirts, and a red jacket that he would soon be known for.

In Alexis’s perspective, he was already compelling, yet he hadn’t spoke a word. Perhaps it was because he was smiling at nothing and didn’t look stupid at all. She reached for his hand so quickly, nothing could be stopped – It felt like forever since Jade had touched somebody.

“Hi, I’m Alexis Rose, this’ll be my first year studying at Donogan, but my older brother has been a substitute teacher here for a couple of years. I can point you boys in the right direction if you want.”

“Please do.” Jade nodded. Sundance could have input that he knew the Academy walls well because of his older brother, too, but he didn’t speak up. Alexis twisted around, sending her long hair cascading backwards. She led the boys down several gray halls toward the sunlit auditorium.

“I can already smell the dusty old Sorting hat.” Sundance joked to break his own ice. Jade made a face and laughed.

“Ah, it’s already started.” Alexis inducted the boys to the echoed commotion emanating from the huge auditorium. The teenagers in the room were new and disoriented, so things were just happening out of order, with or without you. The room was cluttered with people, seats, and baggage, but the main attraction was the gorgeous oak-wood stage, a strangely misplaced, yet matching bar counter in the right wing, the antique oil paintings, and the two-hundred year-old ballroom floor.

Attention was brought to a tall, broad-shouldered man with long, cape-like hair. He was older, but still fit and extravagant in his pastel-mango hued suit. This was Maxwell Donogan himself, the inherent founder and owner of Donogan Academy, who’d come especially for the purpose of welcoming the latest students to the high school. Donogan’s speech progressed genially, but Jade missed most of it due to the teeming amount of noises, heads, and names. Names. He just knew he was going to forget people’s names, but the bomb was dropped.

Alexis began. As she’d said before, her brother Addison Rose, substituted in environmental studies. His best friend, “Pidge” Masters, an accomplished son of foreign immigrants, lived in the upstairs of Donogan Academy’s private library as a live-in librarian.

“He’s a sweet guy once you get to know him – still young, still on our page.”

While Sundance Truesdale was just joining, his big brother, Twilight Truesdale, had been at Donogan Academy for years, trying to gain the respect of the sophisticated Maxwell Donogan, so that he’d be picked to join Donogan’s prestigious robotics laboratory and move up in the world. He was much older than even third-year students, but had a special residency as he did numerous jobs around the school.

“Oh, and by the way,” Alexis cautioned. “we just call him Truesdale, he hates being called Twilight, he *can’t stand* the book.”

Another pair of siblings was the Bronwyns. The studious Brittney (usually called Britt), and the romantic Illiad, who had a crush on Addison.

Chastity Patricks, an older student, was a troublemaker, and several grades behind. Alexis was rather sour about his description; Jade could tell she didn’t like him much.

Those in their second year at Donogan Academy included football team members Berry Bury, and Malcolm Dion.

Class president Milton Ford (also referred to as Milly), called G.L Ford her little brother, and the athletic Josh McDonald, her boyfriend.

G.L Ford's buddies were Averell Jobere, Connie Blagden, and Hank Swenson; a bumbling soul who adamantly knew what he wanted to be when he grew up, but had to "waste time with this whole high school thing" to get on with it. He wanted to be a park ranger.

Among the newbies was Blaze Sigmonton, Chase Winston, and the French, Sherry Lagrand.

Also new, and having a foreign background, was the wealthy Florian Forbes, whom Alexis knew little about.

The rest of the hubbub was Alexis's girlfriends, Milly's followers, the rest of the football team, the winners, the losers, teachers, and staff. All were present except for another new name, Yohan sadie Jones, a boy whom wasn't due to arrive until several weeks in. Alexis heard it was because of some health condition, but she probably knew less about Jones than the fabulous Florian Forbes, whom was actually in the room.

After the speech, Sebastian Izinski, the science and biology professor, gave orders to the males inheriting dorm rooms, to follow him; He was a very distinct-looking character, dark in the hair, gray in the eyes, and pale in the skin.

Alexis waved to Jade, hoping to talk more later – she was crazy for the kid's energy. It put her in utmost suspenseful curiosity; deep wishing, to become friends with the "mysterious" Jade Jewel.

It was at this point that Jade realized he'd stepped into the big, bad, world. He'd be living in a dormitory, left to fend for himself; As the group tailed Sebastian, Jade endured much pushing, prodding, and hissed ridicule. He was totally appalled, but Sebastian stuck up for him.

"Can the lot of you tolerate the man of mild character, in the red? Are you from a contrasting planet, Mr. Jewel?"

In the well-architected halls, Sebastian stopped several times to assign names to doors. Jade heard his. He was put with Sundance, Chastity, and Chase, but Sebastian added a specific note:

"I do hope you will be gracious guests to Mr. Truesdale. He lives a door adjacent to your kitchenette."

The boys peered in, the dorm was just a little different than the others. The alcove near the coffee counter, was indeed, the door to another room. This meant they'd be sharing the main living space with Truesdale.

"Pardon the puzzle-piece accommodations," Sebastian said. "but these old buildings were once marvelous Victorian homes, not originally built for us modern folk."

"An old house? You mean people lived here?" Jade asked, trying to imagine having such a gigantic, wealthy house all to yourself – it almost felt like it'd be too much.

“Quite,” Sebastian turned to finish his job, but extended his reply. “so you may also want to be cordial to the ghosts.”

“Can’t wait to meet ‘em!” Jade grinned.

Once Sebastian was gone, the boys threw their luggage to the floor and laughed. Chastity dusted his spidery hands with a clap, his swank, ebony up-do, thin, black eyes, and curly smile, owned the room.

“Let’s get started!”

Chase and Chastity took the bunk while Sundance and Jade took the two beds on the other end of the room. Jade and Sundance put their clothes away in the drawers under the mattresses, while Chase and Chastity used the dresser. They stocked the bathroom with their toiletries and packed the living room bookshelves with favorite books, comics, music, and DVDs; Although hardly any of this was Jade’s since he’d gotten rid of many of his belongings before moving. As a final touch, Chastity plastered the walls with Elvis Presley, Led Zeppline, and Green Day posters.

“Like the legends, eh?” Sundance commented.

Just as they finished unpacking, Berry Bury poked his face in the door.

“Yo!” He shouted.

“What’s up?” Jade answered, trying to be cool.

“Came to inform ya’ll they’re doin’ a welcome buffet at five sharp, hope yer comin’!”

“We’ll consider it.” Jade said, feeling kind of tired.

“Consider it done!” Chase rubbed his rotund belly.

“Thanks.” Sundance capped. Berry disappeared.

The boys persuaded Jade to join in on the festivities, dragging him to the party for some fun, tasty food, and laughs.

Jade was not used to the cuisine. His innate draw to sesame, wasabi, tamari and ginger wasn’t going to be satiated here. He made a mental note to bring his own lunches, but accepted what was in front of him for now.

The boys slowly got to know each other.

Chastity, as they already knew, was a huge classic rock fan, as well as other types of music. He liked jogging, karaoke, National Geographic, samurais, and going to the movies. His favorite animals were amphibians, and he was intent on getting a pet poison arrow frog soon, even though pets were against the dorm rules.

Sundance enjoyed music, computing, comics, and being goofy. He loved holidays (when he spent them with friends, *not family*), and he liked watching and voting during talent-themed TV shows.

Chase loved food, it was certainly no secret. But he just as well loved sketching and photography. He could get lost in video games if you let him, but he also invested in making them.

All three of Jade's dorm mates seemed to be big gamers. When they talked about the best, newest games that had just been released, Jade was clueless.

When Jade's turn to talk came, he didn't know what to say. He'd only been a big reader all his life because he wondered what life was like. He could never keep a hobby because he was interested in everything. He couldn't appreciate fantasy because he didn't even know reality. His parents and tutors had only wished for him to be brilliant and respectable, nothing more. His explanation came out muddled, and was getting messy, so the conversation easily took a switch in topic when one of the girls' tables got loud; Everyone squealing and giggling at once.

"It's Florian Forbes." Sundance whispered through a bite of oily pepperoni pizza.

"Damn rich cat." Chastity muttered. Chase just kept grubbing down on his flakey, buttery, pigs-in-a-blanket. Jade was again shocked at the promptness to insult.

"What's so bad about him?" Jade glanced over to the only teenager in the room wearing a suit and tie. His silvery-white suit went well with a multi-blue colored tie, inadvertently matching his blue irises, and platinum, shoulder-length hair, styled in a loosely combed, wind-swept fashion. He was rather short for his age, but had impeccable manners that did not take away from being able to perform a comedy lick.

"I dunno..." Chastity scowled. "He just thinks he's so great. I mean, shouldn't Mr. Oxford shoes be going to a millionaire school, or have a private tutor or something?"

Chase started wolfing down red, white, and blue frosted brownies. He shrugged.

Yawning at the incriminations, Sundance pointed his caramelized corn-dog at Jade to dramatically change the subject.

"I think Alexis Rose was already checking you out."

Jade acknowledged him with a doubtful crunch, he coughed on his spicy potato chip, reached for his water bottle and swigged.

"That's ridiculous," He smirked, cheeks brightened. "I'm a wreck! Besides, I'm not interested in dating."

"WHAT?!" Sundance fizzed. "How could you not notice you're a headturner?"

"What?"

"When are you from?" Sundance slapped his forehead. "C'mon, didn't you see her friends in the auditorium?" Sundance persisted.

“I saw em.” Chastity warranted jealously. “But Forbes is gonna hog them all.”

“You know, I thought Alexis liked Truesdale.” Chase input, scratching at his short, thick, well-cut black hair.

“No, no, you got it all wrong,” Sundance corrected him. “Truesdale’s into Alexis, she’s totally **not** into Truesdale. But that Bronwyn girl is, you know? The younger sister...”

Jade sighed, he couldn’t help but think that this was boring. Yet, going to talk with someone else still felt intimidating. Dangerous. Other groups of boys yelled, guffawed, swore, joked, and argued over something or another. A lot of people were yapping at their phones, and Jade was too modest to go speak up to any girls.

He recalled Truesdale. Where was he? He wanted to meet him since they’d kind of be sharing dorms. He would’ve asked Sundance, but Sundance was too busy blabbering and Jade didn’t want to interrupt. Maybe he’d see Truesdale after the party.

In the meantime, Jade decided to go ahead and approach Florian Forbes.

“Hi, I’m Jade, nice to meet you, Florian.”

“Oh... Uh, hello.” Florian stuttered, not because he was bashful, but because he was surprised.

Florian was super nice, and easy to talk to. They swept over academics, shared interests, and found they had a lot in common. Both were the same age, and beginning Donogan a grade ahead, although Jade was sure Florian was far smarter. Florian even promised Jade a tennis match, however, Florian was so casual, Jade wasn’t sure if he meant it, or was just mentioning it. They then got on to the topic of music, Florian gabbing on about his precious violin, saxophone, and cello.

“Do you play any instruments?” Florian sipped the last of the sparkling mineral water he’d brought. Jade chuckled, scratching the back of his neck.

“Are you kidding? The only instrument I can play is the triangle.”

They had a hard laugh.

Jade was so wrapped up in the amicable conversation, that when Florian’s amused expression sank away, Jade became confused. He whirled around like a waterfall, realizing that Florian’s stare was directed at the commotion brewing across the room. It was like an energy ball had exploded, voices gashed into a form of childish chaos.

The bigger boys had swiped Sundance’s glasses, which were now being tossed in a game of catch among the tables. The poke-fun bluster had Sundance dancing around, helpless to the situation. To make matters worse, nobody else was doing anything about it. Florian sighed and left to get the attention of a teacher.

Jade noticed a man in a long, but light coat, with dusty black hair and dim gray eyes. He looked older than he actually was, and stood, watching the spectacle with folded arms.

“Um, are you a teacher? Can you tell them to stop?” Jade asked, worriedly.

“He needs to learn to stick up for himself.” The young man’s gravely voice practically crippled the air. In an instant, Jade realized that this man, was Twilight Truesdale, Sundance’s own brother.

Jade was abhorred. But he then got an idea.

Having just about enough of the nonsense, Jade inserted himself into the boister, pretending to play along. He gaily shouted.

“Hey, over here!”

The boys robotically threw the glasses to him, and he caught them softly, wiped them down, and triumphantly handed them over to Sundance.

“Thanks!”

The rowdy bunch grumbled at Jade for ending their entertainment, some of them looking almost too furious for something so pointless, including Truesdale whom was still watching from afar.

Jade swallowed in alarm. Well what was he expecting to happen?

By the time Florian brought Professor Izinski to the scene, the heist was done, but he gave a gruff word of warning anyway, and took a seat in the back of the room with eyes pealed. Although things returned to normal fairly quickly, intrigue flooded the hall, followed by a chorus of favorable mutters. Jade was gifted hopeful glimpses, and gazes of delightful surprise.

“I knew he was special.” Alexis hassled her friends. They nodded handfuls of beautiful curls skeptically, rolling their mascaraed lashes, and got back to the all important task of flipping through a chick-flick magazine.

“He’s nice, Alexis, for Pete’s sake, big deal.”

The party should, could, and would have been a good time for everybody, but the popularity competition was on, and Jade was completely unaware.

On the way back to their dorm room, Sundance shamefully confronted Jade.

“Um... Thanks Jade.”

“No problem, they’re justa buncha bullies, I’ve got your back-”

“Yeah, I guess, but that’s not what I meant...”

“Huh?”

"This morning, when you introduced yourself to me, and just decided to be my friend... That... Thanks for that."

Jade smiled.

Chapter 2

Sebastian's Class

Sundance, Chastity, and Chase were in bed.

Jade got up from his flashlight-lit adventure novel, suddenly recalling he'd left his phone in the mess hall. He never really used cell phones that much, but his parents bought him one before leaving for school, rubbing it in, just how much it cost them. Freaked, Jade crept out of the dorm room hoping he'd remember his way to the dining room - and his way back. The cafeteria had been cleared of the party rubbish earlier, and was now, utterly spotless. He was sure he'd get it back from the lost and found, but couldn't help wondering if someone just decided to take it. After all, school wasn't turning out to be what Jade had dreampt it to be... He'd gained more foes than knowledge in just under twenty-four hours.

As Jade reached the dorm room hall, he crossed paths with Truesdale.

"Good evening, Jade." Truesdale grinded his teeth as he said the forbidden name.

"Um... Good evening." Jade replied, trying to hurry back to bed. He wasn't going to bother telling off on Truesdale for not aiding his brother, but Truesdale nabbed Jade's shoulder.

"Kid," He said. "you're in the *real world* now. It's every man for himself. Don't play hero when you **know** you're gonna be the dog."

Jade was innocently perplexed.

"I'm Sundance's friend now." He pulled away, wishing to end the confrontation.

"It's only the first day."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Truesdale beamed almost cruelly.

"You are **so** clueless you brat." He growled in delight. Jade cringed.

"Whatever. Goodnight Twilight." Jade accidentally slipped. He hastened to bed.

"Do *not* call me that." Truesdale retired to his room, vanishing darkly.

The boys' alarm clock buzzed.

Jade was the first to his feet, anticipating the rising day. He showered, scrubbed, brushed and flossed. He pep-talked himself in the mirror, and declared things would be far better today. By the time he was packing his book bags, he had to re-ring the clock to shake Chase awake. Some went to breakfast before

washing up or preparing their bags. It was at the breakfast table that Jade confided to Sundance about his brother. Sundance waved it off.

“Let it go, that’s just the way it is,” Sundance exhaled. “stop attracting attention to yourself, yer gonna get creamed.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Whadaya mean, what do I mean!?” Sundance accused Jade with an aimed cinnamon toast stick. He went on to explain what he called the “pack order”, and warned Jade not to anger those who were “alphas”, and to stay an “omega” if he wanted to live. Jade gave an eye roll.

“I’m not kidding!” Sundance insisted. “Do something great, and they’ll seek to exterminate you, y’ know? Like on that creepy pest control commercial?”

Jade could only blurt a laugh.

The classes were pretty much how the boys expected them to be; boring, long, and tense. There was a definite scorn for Ambrose Godwin’s math class. Second-year students gossiped about him to the newbies as though he were an evil warlock hellbent on destroying meager little boys and girls. Tardiness, dressage, hygiene, etiquette, he would find some reason to verbally abuse you, and if he couldn’t, he’d make something up; Every word he spoke was like the utterance of some sort of spell. It was impossible to *not* act zombishly focused during his class, for he was so keen, that the slightest glance being thrown towards a window would be heard about like it was a punishable crime.

The boys breathed a sigh of relief as they walked into science class, grateful to see the level-headed Sebastian Izinski at the front desk, which was embellished with succulents. His black hair was combed smartly. He was dressed well, but they also found out he had a peculiar habit of wearing shining, sunny-yellow.

“Good day my students,” Sebastian said composedly with his distinguished, but buoyant British accent. “I do hope you brought your copy of Basic Biology, edition nine, book one?”

The teenagers groaned a mocking “yes”, but laughed at themselves once they heard it. Dr. Izinski tittered along.

“Good. However, I thought we’d try something a little different today... I was asked by an old retired doctor to finish a little beginning-of-school tradition.” He faced the white board and began to write. He then unstacked a pile of books at record speed to find the textbook he was looking for, and flipped it open. It was the basics of psychology and physiology book.

Smelling of musty paper, he started to read the introductory. Sebastian bent his normal teachings that day to slip in a small study on the brain and understanding how one thinks and works – it was a sentiment towards the hardships of being an adolescent in a crazy world. He perhaps vainly believed it would aid in someone's journey of life.

Class went on as planned, but Jade found himself being sucked into Sebastian's words. To Jade, this was less of a class than it was an inspirational speech – he'd discovered his favorite subject! And quite possibly, his favorite teacher. This was exactly what Jade needed to help navigate the environment he'd just been thrown into.

As science class was dismissed, Florian punted Jade's arm on the way out; he'd seen Jade glow through the whole hour.

“Isn’t it fascinating? I love this subject too!”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t it just make you feel more human?!” Florian threw his palms up like the nerd he was. Jade just beamed.

“Listen, I’ve got chemistry, English, and a meeting with the orchestra, but I’m free for the courts tonight if you’re game.”

Florian was talking about that promised tennis match.

“Sure, I’ll be there.” Jade obliged. He was so happy he could have burst out of his photons.

“Right on.”

The campus tennis court was empty and cracked. Wild Blackberries grew in the crevices of the blue concrete as the ground keepers neglected it. The tall, chain-link fence was usurped in lush Smilax.

It was early sunset when Florian arrived, dressed in athletic wear. He had balls and rackets slung over his back. Jade hadn’t been waiting long.

The first thing that Florian did was throw Jade an object. Jade caught it like a bean bag, but it wasn’t a bean bag – it was Jade’s lost phone.

“Oh gosh, Florian, thank you! Where’d you find it?”

“I bought it back from Truesdale.” Florian answered casually, beginning to dribble a ball. Jade thought he misheard Florian for a second, but he questioned him anyway.

“I’m sorry, did you say, *buy*?” He confirmed as he pocketed one of his only possessions.

“Don’t worry Jade, you’re worth it. I think you’re my kinda guy.” Florian complimented as they stepped onto the whale-blue court. Florian served.

“You care about learning and having fun, y’ know? Like real fun?”

“I think I see what you’re saying... ” Jade whacked the electric-green ball too soon.

“I mean, you like me cause I’m cool, not rich, right?” Florian smiled as he passed the ball.

“Of course, why do you ask?”

“It’s hard to find people like that. I knew you’d be different from the moment I saw you.”

“That’s what everyone keeps saying, but it’s not like anybody knows me. We’ve been here, what? Two days?”

“Trust me, it’s obvious.” Florian scored again.

For the first few weeks of being at Donogan Academy, Jade was protecting Sundance and Chase in the hallways. Chastity was aggressive enough to pick his own fights, though Jade hated that he had to at all. While Jade was busy bracing himself heroically, Truesdale was laughing to see such a sight.

Meals, movies, and games were all played with his dorm mates, while Florian became Jade’s study partner. They had long, tactful, mystery-crunching discussions about their favored subjects, and of course, when they had free time, they hit the tennis courts for a match.

Sebastian Izinski saw the two take to his classes well, but to their disconcert, he guiltily admitted the truth to the two.

“I am terribly sorry to say, that my little “psychology” lesson won’t last forever, I am a scientist, mind you, whom should be teaching a science class. I guise this little course under biology, but technically, I’m here for other areas of academics. See it this way,” Sebastian entertained. “I sneak these gems in at the beginning of every school year in hopes that fascinated lads and lassies like you will be inspired to continue their own education of the mind.” Sebastian managed intelligently.

“I think I see... ” Jade smirked. “Are you really a science teacher?”

“Probably not, in some respects.” The fellow human being folded his fingers.

Friday would be the last of Sebastian’s “biology classes”, and the psychology geeks wanted to be a part of it. They got the professor’s permission to bring in a few props, so after Sebastian’s lesson about the fundamentals of cognition, the boys decided to do a presentation on cognitive blind spots, Florian, the star of the show, and Jade, his sidekick, demonstrated what this phenomena was by doing a series of card spreads and magic tricks. To prove the point that these were simply mind games, Florian even revealed some of his secrets.

There were floored students, entertained students, and those that egged them on. Though some, were disgusted by the two's "boastful showing off".

It had been both a successful day, and a bad one for the dynamic duo. They felt happy for being on such good regards with Sebastian, and Jade felt particularly proud about getting up in front of the class without having stage fright. They'd gotten plenty of positive feedback from class mates, but the celebration was quickly overshadowed by the envious and mean.

Florian couldn't leave his expensive bags, clothes, or any item, for fifteen minutes without it getting filched or ruined. Jade had been left sticky notes with doodles of he and Florian as magicians with crude captions. At least Jade could actually laugh at these, because they truly were, that dumb.

It was Florian he worried about – preeminently after Florian's locker was broken into while he was at the pool. The swim coach proclaimed it was "about time to change out those rusty old lockers, anyway". But on behalf of the brand-new locker room make-over, bullies sneered at Florian for "getting whatever he wanted".

Florian was not concerned with the rumors by this time, he was too busy being sad and enraged about one of the objects that had been stolen from his locker that day; A silver and diamond watch that belonged to his Grandfather. He was so desperate to get it back, that he offered a reward for its' return.

Several days went by, but it never showed up.

One night, when Jade's dorm was up late, the boys were having a contest to see who could tell the spookiest ghost story.

Chastity went first, telling a wild, over-exaggerated tale about Elvis Presley's ghost and how he still roams the streets of Memphis; It was made scary with murder details, but he kept going too off subject. Sundance sat through that story with a sarcastic expression glued to his face. He didn't get it at all.

Chase came up with a fiction involving dinosaurs, headhunters, pirates, giant whales, and seafaring turmoil. Chastity complained that he was plagiarizing *Moby Dick*, but Jade defended him by reminding Chastity that there were no dinosaurs in *Moby Dick*. None the less, the fabrication was difficult to follow, and didn't end up being very scary because of that.

Next, Sundance tried to tell a terrifying tale about his big brother and his big brother's girlfriend being chased and brainwashed by vampires into being people he didn't know. At the end of that story, the rest of the boys shared a quizzical glance and shrugged.

It was then Jade's turn. It took him a moment to figure something out, but he recalled a dream he'd had a couple days before, and began to describe it as he leaned into the flashlight-campfire.

"It was a typical Monday morning..."

"Monday!" Sundance wailed in mock fear.

"Oh just wait—"

The first part involved a boy reflecting upon a time he was in school, and could have made a lot of friends, but didn't, because he didn't know who he truly was. He then goes on to discover that in an abandoned mansion, his "creativity" got locked away in a dark closet, and when he opens it, toy soldiers, ballet dancers dressed in blue and red, ninjas, and talking animals come crawling out, and this "creativity" gets lost across the city. Many years later, after once again, trying to live a normal life, the boy has forgotten all about this, and is again looking for his lost creativity, but now, he is worn and mutated by what others told him to be, which has turned him into a giant, alien centipede that wears clown make up and a hat, to cover up his twisted face. He can never go into public, and avoids being seen by traveling through the vents and attics of buildings. One day he goes back to try and claim his true self again, but all that's left in the mansion is a dusty, wooden, string instrument that is beginning to fall apart. He is so distraught, that he leaves his body by turning into a bird, which floats higher, and higher into the sky at sunrise, disappearing into the ether as a ghostly spirit, never to be seen again... When suddenly, he hears a voice, calling him back to Earth... The voices of all the creatures that had been hidden in the mansion's closet.

Jade ended it there.

There was a suffocating pause. The boy's mouths were hanging open.

Someone knocked on the door.

They jumped ten feet in the air. Jade rushed to get it, expecting it was a staff member coming to inform them of the racket they were making, but it wasn't. Jade stepped into the hallway, looking left and right. He closed the door slowly and went back to his spot on the floor.

"Guess we should be quieter."

"Man, Jade, where'd you learn to tell stories like that? I thought you said you had no imagination. *You are wicked.*" Chastity shook off a grimace.

The knock resounded once more. Everyone stood.

“Aw, c’mon... ”

Like a movie scene, each of the boys poked their head out the door, one by one, over one another’s. There was nobody in sight. Chastity grunted and returned to the room, putting his hands on his hips. He was back in reality.

“You know, all this taunting you and Florian attract is starting to get on my nerves.” He said, blaming the two for the interference.

“Hey, it’s not their fault.” Sundance reminded.

“I know, but it’s really pissing.”

Jade drowned out the boys’ fruitless argument in favor of an odd, distant noise... Truesdale opened his bedroom door.

“Will you four, *please* go to sleep?!” He shot hotly. “Don’t make me bring the dorm master into this!” He slammed his door shut, which ironically, probably woke the boys in the surrounding rooms. Sundance sighed.

“He’s right, let’s hit the sack, just lock the door or something, eh? Jade, what are you doing?”

“You hear that?” He whispered. The guys strained to listen... Jade was being drawn into the hall again.

“Really, doesn’t anyone else hear that?”

“Yeah, actually... ” Chastity paused. Chase gulped.

“Did you have to say that?”

The boys moved towards the walls, the sound of footsteps dashing through the darkness made them move out of the way – to their shock, no one came through... The footsteps faded on their own.

“Okay, that was *super* eerie.” Sundance ducked back into the room. “Can we just go to bed now?”

Jade smiled, vanishing down the hall. The noises from before had not seized, there was still murmuring on the distant wind. Chastity was right behind Jade, armed with a battery operated torch. Chase and Sundance meekly tagged along. They exited the dormitory guilt-ridden, but their curiosity could not be held back.

Outside, the decorative gardens sat plain in front of them, the flowers were closed up for the night. Lamplight hung from above onto the Azaleas, grass, and pavement. The strange noise became more evident, sounding like illustrious sobbing, or that of a female’s voice, singing – Jade couldn’t decide what it sounded more like, but the source seemed to lie behind the next set of trees - and the walkway, to the girl’s dormitory.

Chastity wilted.

"Weeelllp, if there's anything scarier than an unidentifiable howl on the wind, it's gotta be waltzing into Lady Gaga land."

"He's right." Sundance hissed. "If we get caught over there, we'll get punished *forever*. Come on, let's go get some shut-eye."

"You guys go on, I want to know what that sound is." Jade trekked on.

"Nice knowin' ya." Chase and Chastity went easy.

Fearing that he would lose his only friend, Sundance stayed put, unsure of what to do.

With the flashlight low, Jade trampled piles of pine needles as to not use the obvious side walk. The blackness was rather spooky, spreading its lacy shadows across the trees, owls sung softly in the crooked branches. The nocturnal insects screamed from their perches on the tree bark, unable to be seen in the grayness.

Gradually, Jade crept closer to the area his ears alerted him to go, and found that there was indeed a girl singing into the late hours... But there was also sobbing, but the sobbing sounded more like that of a young man's.

He trailed after the ruckus all the way into the back of the antique two-story, that served as the girl's dorms. In the backyard, where the house sidled the edge of the forest's curtain, Jade was confronted with a massive rock that jutted up from the ground, almost into the treetops. Its amazing smooth surface caught the shine of the not-so-perfectly-round Moon.

At the top, was a thin shadow, sitting against the Moon's glow – a peculiarly dressed boy in heavy clothes, and weird-looking hat, crying into his hands, face buried, wet with tears.

"Hey... Are you okay?"

The stranger did nothing like he couldn't hear Jade at all. Jade made a move to scramble up the stone, but it was too slick and slippery.

"Hang on, it's okay, I'm coming..." Jade said comfortingly, although he wasn't making it far. He slipped back down to the bottom, with a thud.

"Ow." Jade muttered, rubbing his rear.

Suddenly the young man stood, wiping sadness from his cheek, he paced and paced like all hope was lost, then turned to make his way down the rock, his gaze was held straight ahead – Jade could see directly into the clear-blue eyes of the soldier, ravaged, grief-stricken, haunting... Utterly, back-stabbingly, haunting. His wandering feet dragged to the sound of rusty chains... Things seemed to go dark around Jade, the war prisoner becoming the only thing in sight – And Jade, the only thing in the

soldier's sight. The soldier's eyes grew wide with disbelief. Shock. His dry lips spoke something that lapsed before hitting Jade's ears seconds later – A voice curdling from tired lungs, so yearnful, it made Jade's heart bump.

"Help us! Please help us! Mercy! Call yourself Stan A. Solve at the entrance of Camp Pinto, they'll let you in, Please help us, please..."

"Impressive rock, huh?"

Jade was back. He whirled around to the arrival of Blaze Sigmonton, the girl who'd been singing into the night. She pulled her headphones down, stuffed her hands into her jean short's pockets, and peered out from beneath a periwinkle baseball cap. Her warm-brown eyes were shaded by bored lids. Jade was sweating.

"Uh... Yeah..." He managed to say. "Um... Did you see...? Never mind, what are you doing out here?"

"Singin', howlin', whatever you want to call it." She shrugged, kind of blushing. "Whater you doing out here?"

"Oh, yeah, well... I heard some strange noises, and then I heard you singing, and well... um..."

"It's okay, I know I sound terrible, it's more of just a... Fond memory. Started singing at night ever since my dog died, we used to howl at the Moon together." Blaze's long hair appeared soft and lonesome fondled in the breeze. Jade briefly reached out.

"I know how that is... to lose a pet, I mean. I lost a cat that was special to me. I really miss him. I don't think I could ever have another cat again."

"Thanks for saying that, lotsa people don't understand it."

They gyrated back to the ghoulish stone.

"Say... Do you ever see anybody else out here?" Jade inquired.

"You're the first."

Jade downloaded that for a moment. It began to sprinkle rain.

"Okay, yeah. I guess I should head back, don't mean to get anyone in trouble."

"Same here. G'night then." Blaze nodded, taking her leave. As she did, a piece of jewelery on her wrist caught the moonlight, glinting fervently.

It was Florian's missing watch.

Chapter 3

Alexis's Touch Down

Florian was just glowing to have the watch back. Blaze gladly handed it over after hearing Florian's story, and Florian bestowed the reward money in return. Unfortunately, Blaze did not know whom had procured the watch first, though she heard from Milly that it had been traded down a line of girls after it was given as a persuasive, "expensive" gift by some desperate boy. This really stated nothing about who had stolen it, but Florian was just relieved to have it back in his possession.

"Why weren't *yoou* afraid?!" Sundance roused during lunch, snapping open a can of lemon-lime soda in irritation. Florian was already sipping his favorite berry-flavored sparkling water.

"I was," Jade raised his shoulders, digging into his oozing lasagna. "I'm just... more into the adventure of it all."

"Oh sure, what kinda excuse is that! That was so freaky last night – And then Truesdale came to find us! I didn't want him to slug you, so I distracted him while you had all the fun. Maybe next time I should–"

"You know that's pure sugar." Alexis informed, goggling Sundance's soda-pop. He paused to reassemble his lopsided glasses.

"Mind if I join you guys?"

Jade nodded and gestured as a noodle fell back onto his plate. Alexis chuckled as Sundance haphazardly cleared way for her to sit. She unscrewed the cap to a bottle of a veggie, fruit-mix smoothie while Jade smiled sheepishly from behind his napkin. Florian curtly greeted the girl with his more, well-practiced manners.

"Hi Florian, glad to hear about the watch." Alexis mentioned. "So what's up? What's goin' on over here? Sounds exciting whatever it is."

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you." Jade said, cryptically.

"I wasn't there, but it sounds *super* interesting" Florian mused, forking at a piece of his home-made grilled steak. "I wonder if the reticular activating system has anything to do with it."

"Oh yeah... Like if I was thinking about that bumming history class from the other day... "

The psychology nerds went rattling off, but Sundance stopped them with a loud: "ANYWAY–"

"Oh, right," Jade obeyed. "anyway, we ran into a werewolf last night, and Sundance had to save me and carry me to the infirmary after we were brutally attacked by the vicious beast"

Sundance liked the fact that Jade made him the champion of the fib. Florian was chortling and Alexis was shaking her head.

“Sounds like fun.” Alexis batted an eye.

“It was.” Jade grinned. Alexis ate a bite of her Caesar salad.

“So what *really* happened? Was it that Blaze Sigmonton girl?”

“You know about that?”

“Well can’t everyone hear her wailing sad songs at the top of her lungs in the middle of night? She’s gonna get herself expelled, gosh...”

There was a pause as they were all just dining. Only Florian knew how to get mouths hopping again.

“So Alexis,” Florian began conversationally. “how come you’re not sitting with the girls?”

“Oh, you know, even a girl’s gotta break from the giggles and gossip.”

“Not really that type?” Sundance chaffed.

“Nope.” She popped.

Sundance suddenly had a devilish grin on his face. He shoveled lasagna down his throat with animation.

“Easy there, Sunny.” Jade said humorously. Sundance glugged squeamishly and seized his tray.

“I’m done, see ya guys later.” He did a thumbs up. Florian understood the cue, and gracefully finished his luxurious piece of meat. He sipped the last of his bubbly with a satisfied lip-smack.

“Ahh! That was *divine*! I will see you two in class, in about half an hour, farewell for now, dear fellowships!”

Their dubious plot to get Jade to date, was a little too dramatic to fool Jade. He laughed. Alexis had no idea what he was laughing at, but it made her lose to a giggle.

Jade’s friends got their way.

“I like you.” Alexis told Jade while his head was down. “I like you cause you’re different.”

He released his bit lip and blushed.

“*Why do people keep saying that?*”

“But it’s true, you’re so different from the other boys, you’re not lost in it all. It’s almost like you actually know what you’re here for.”

Jade didn’t agree. He felt lost in his own little world, caring about things nobody else seemed to care about. He thought he’d come here to find and be himself so that he could make some honest-to-goodness friends, but not everybody here was interested in being honest. He wanted to find out what he

loved doing in life, but not everyone here was interested in loving what they were doing. If that's what she meant, he didn't bother explaining.

"Well... I was tutored my whole life, school is kinda new for me." Was all Jade could say.

"And how is that working out for you?"

"Great! I'm thrilled! I finally got people I can call friends, and it's only been a few weeks! Can't it only get better?"

"Whoa boy, you *are* from another planet, spare me the grief and don't get yourself into trouble now."

Jade glanced away, smiling at himself.

The bright-beige dining hall resounded with calamity from the football team's tables, there were twinkling cellphones, clicking soda cans, and brisk conversations blasting away all of the would-be silence.

Jade looked up just on time to see a pelted orange come his way. He caught the fruit out of sheer luck. Alexis was surprised.

While Alexis twirled around to find out who threw it, Jade was reading the sticky-note attached to the orange. "Kiss her". It read.

With Sundance and Florian no where to be seen, Jade could assume this was a more sinister attempt at humiliating him; The boy that had flung the fruit was snickering beneath the lively gesticulating of the football team.

Jade went ahead and threw the orange back to him, but instead of catching it, he allowed it to fall smack into the middle of the table, splattering spaghetti sauce on the boys, and knocking over numerous beverages. Jade jumped up, flooded with sorriness.

"*I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to-*"

Alexis dropped her utensil as Jade was unexpectedly slopped in the face by a chunk of mashed potatoes. Before Jade could wipe it out of his eyes, the boys were hysterical, and one brandished a phone high in the air to show that he'd gotten it all on camera. From the table across, Sherry Lagrand, a die-hard tomboy, witnessed the whole thing. She vengefully pitched an apple at the culprit with deadly accuracy. That was that.

The hall went ablaze in showers of good old fashioned southern cooking – and a little bit of lasagna. Alexis pulled Jade from the battle field; both covered in some gravy or another. She went skidding down a hall Jade had never been before.

"Where are we going?!"

“To get Heather!”

“Who’s that?”

“The cook!”

Heather was a large, elderly woman with brown hair and brown eyes that peered through tiny spectacles. She always wore floral, plaid, or polka-dots, which reminded her of the ladies from her youth. She always wore an apron, whether she was in the kitchen or not, and was warm, kind, sweet - but busy. She was a hard worker, and was quite devastated to hear that one of her carefully crafted meals had gone out the window.

As a witness, Alexis justified Jade, but the rest of the school staff could not deny what was “caught on camera” (The cameraman had already edited the piece he wanted to keep). Godwin was particularly disgusted with Jade, and so he was blamed for starting the disaster, and sent to the dining hall to clean up the catastrophe just like everyone else who’d been a part of it.

Truesdale was furious because he’d done no such throwing of anyone’s precious meal. On the flip-side, neither had Jade, and Truesdale knew that, but didn’t care. It was just another opportunity to be his malicious self.

“*Will you grow up?!*” Truesdale ground it in.

The punishment didn’t end there.

Jade would use his free time to work for Ms. Heather in the cafeteria, for the next week.

Jade went to bed feeling cheated and lonely.

Jade showed up at the cafeteria the next day.

Among the pots, pans, stainless steel, and heat of the cookery, he found Alexis there, also lacing up an apron.

She’d volunteered herself to help make up for the day before. Jade was so happy he hugged her.

Heather greeted the two as pleasant as ever, by no means was she going to make this a punishment while she was in charge; she handed them gloves, hairnets and a recipe folder.

“I know what happened, it wasn’t your fault, I believe you, Jade.” Heather made sure to let Jade hear.

“Thanks... It’s just hard when no one’s on your side...”

“Certainly,” Heather agreed. “but nothing we can do now, let’s make this fun then, shall we?”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Jade smiled genuinely.

The embarrassment eventually wore off as Heather made the two feel just about as welcome as guests at a potluck. She was interested in everything they had to say, and could make a joke appear out of nowhere. They got messy, had a blast, and learned just how much time and effort went into Heather's meticulous job.

The teenagers were tired and sweaty from being in the cookery for an hour, but at the end of the evening, Heather wrapped up extra pieces of cheesy quiche, and sticky, blueberry strudel for them to take home. After that, she sent them on their way.

It made Jade think back to the day of the welcome party, when his palette was still hooked on the Asian food he was used to. He almost chuckled at the idea of packing his own lunches; with school, homework, dodging enemies in the halls, having friends to meet places, and now this, he had zero time to be rolling sushi or braising bok choy.

Over the next few days, the two got more and more familiar with the hacking, chugging, baking, metallic kitchen, and could find all of the various utensils and ingredients themselves. The challenging part, was that Heather had a whole new list of recipes for them to conquer. And Alexis had a demeaning moment of not knowing what a manual beater was.

In the end, the penalty was not as bad as Jade thought it would be, and he even came to look forward to doing chores for Heather. Heather was always nice to the kids, often sending them off with some of the treats for their hard work. She sometimes even had wise words of advice for the teenagers who struggled with their everyday existence. It wasn't a wonder when the two began to refer to Heather by the nickname of "Grandma".

Jade found himself stopping to think of his real Grandmother... She'd been his best friend until her death, and he wondered if she knew about all the friends he'd made now. He'd been closer to Grandma Kuri than his own Mother, and missed her dearly. He hadn't thought about her in a very long time...

"Jade?" Alexis's glance was asking him to pour the flour.

"Oh, sorry!"

Meanwhile, the situation with the football team was only getting worse. Jade heard from Chase that the Captain of the team, Berry Bury, was actually a pretty nice guy, but even he, was now having trouble dealing with the nonsense that select other members were putting people through.

Jade kept finding oranges everywhere, and one day, when he, Florian and Alexis were walking back from the tennis courts, they were bombarded with oranges by a nasty threesome hiding in the bushes.

After dinner one day, Jade decided to confront them.

Berry Bury didn't notice while he rendered a dramatic football game story, that two of his boys tormented Jade from across the mess hall.

Jade stood and neared the team's table, causing Berry to dwindle his narration in confusion. Seeing Jade approach on his own, Alexis slowly came after, just in case things did not go well.

"*Pardon.*" Jade said firmly. Sherry Lagrand whom was not sitting far, glanced up upon hearing bad French.

"What's goin' down, Jade Jewel?" The rogue played it up with no hesitation. "Notice the weather lately? It's been raining oranges!"

"Yeah, I've noticed." Jade put a hand on his hip. "Think you could find something better to do?"

The bully named Adrian just leaned back in his chair, putting his palms behind his head.

"What's better than taking you down?"

"What do you have against me?"

"Are you *kidding* me? You're Sebastian's pet, you got all the girls talking about nothing! And what about Alexis? She's slaving away in that grimy, old, kitchen because of *you*? I heard from Truesdale that you cheat in class, and yer not as smart as they say. *Dumbass loser.*"

Alexis was ready to pop Adrian one, but she waited to see what Jade would do – he'd paused, but she wasn't sure if he was frozen, or burning... Turned out, he was neither, he just figured there was nothing he could do, and walked away as if he'd never heard a grim string of phrases from anyone.

"You amaze me." Alexis said breathlessly as she and Jade entered the open air of evening. "I mean, I'd have had someone's tooth out for that! The *slander!* Gosh–"

"You'd really pick a fight, Alexis?" Jade questioned, but didn't give her time to answer. "Why is everyone here so... "

"That's just how we teens are, we like causing uproars, stirring trouble, y' know?" Alexis's eyes darted from the distance to him; his expression wasn't buying it. "Haven't you ever been through something like this?" Alexis cuffed his shoulder.

"Sooo... Are you telling me to fight? Are you telling me I'm *supposed* to be an irresponsible kid? Are you telling me everyone **should** be like that?"

The girl was a little surprised. She shook her head, causing her long hair to ripple.

"No!" She deflated. "No, not at all... I like how you are, I'm just terrified for you."

“Well, be careful what you say, cause I don’t believe *everyone* is like that.”

The clapping of their shoes against the side walk was soothingly human, the raging leaves in the trees, the chiming locusts, and the last of the Summer frogs made them quite aware. They hindered their pace at the final lamp post of the boys’ dormitories, where it breached from the shadows behind Jade. They were drenched in the orange glow.

“I guess this is goodnight.” Jade said discouragingly.

“Yeah... Um, hey, I know we’ve been busy with the whole cafeteria thing, but maybe you wanna hang out some time?” Alexis imparted. Jade answered blatantly honest. He wasn’t “interested”.

“As friends?”

Alexis blushed.

“Of course.”

Jade entered the foyer.

Dallying around the lobby of the boys’ dorm, Jade found a campus map on the wall which he plastered his interest to. The grounds were vast; Suddenly it felt more like he was on a camping trip then in boarding school. He then glimpsed to his left; it was a map of the family neighborhood that Donogan Academy used to be. Many of the houses dated back as far as the late eighteen hundreds. He didn’t know much about architecture, but he was impressed that the buildings were still standing and in decent shape – almost several centuries and still going strong.

No wonder the boys’ dorm had a ghost.

Out of the blue, Berry and his boisterous gang flew in, and the place wasn’t so quiet anymore.

“Hey! Kid in the red jacket!” Adrian teased. Berry bonked him on the head, sending him down the hallway. Berry strutted up to Jade with swagger, his red-fleshed bulk of muscle kept him from being taut. His dusty-brown dreadlocks swung as he made it down the hall. He had bright, walnut eyes.

“Jade Jewel, I presume?”

“The one and only. Um... Berry Bury?” Jade glanced sidelong. Berry pointed, incredulous.

“He’s good with th’ names.”

Actually, Jade wasn’t.

“Listen,” Berry assembled himself. “I, uh, just wanted to apologize for Adrian there, he ain’t like, Mr.Wonderful or nothin’...”

“That’s okay,” Jade approved.”but it’d be nice to hear it from him.”

Berry peered down the hallway after the bully to be sure he didn’t over-hear.

“Sorry son, but I don’t think you’ll get that far... Anyway, so... You play football, Jewel?”

Jade glanced down at his skinny-self, compared to Bury, he was just a twig to snap. But he and Florian’s tennis matches were making him stronger, and tennis was definitely his thing. Football? Not so much.

“Nah, probably wouldn’t survive any sports like that.”

Berry and his boys gave a meaty laugh.

“Aw well, maybe next year, but uh, hey, come watch us sometime.” He saluted.

“Sure thing.” Jade assured.

Berry’s compacted chumminess was contagious, and Jade went back to the dorm room feeling accepted. But the moment he reached for the door knob, he back-tracked several steps...

Sundance and Truesdale were shouting at each other. The conspicuous argument between the brothers made Jade wonder where Chase and Chastity were – hopefully, not uncomfortably trapped inside.

Jade thought the better of his actions, thinking that maybe his interference could spare the other boys some grief, and interrupt the disagreement.

He cautiously stepped inside.

Truesdale noticed at once. Sundance did not, and continued to revolt loudly. Jade could not tell from his words what the ordeal was about, but Sundance was cut short anyway.

Once he realized Jade was standing there, he turned redder than he already was.

“Guys, you’re destroying the peace, sheesh, what’s so important?” Jade asked.

“Disturbing the peace, ay?” Truesdale said coolly. “Maybe you ought to rethink who’s responsible for that.”

Sundance pushed at his brother.

“You have no reason to be messing with Jade! He hasn’t done anything to you! If you can’t stand him, then why don’t *you* just LEAVE!”

“Maybe I should, I’ll talk to the staff about switching dorm rooms first thing in the morning”

“That’s fine by me!”

“Whoa, guys,” Jade tried to shed some light. “we can work this out, what happened?”

“*Nothing!*” Sundance cried. “He’s just jealous and angry that nothing is going *his* way!”

Truesdale was instantly lost to a craze that bubbled aggressively at Jade.

“I was supposed to make a comeback with Forbes, and Addison had promised *me* a chance with Alexis! *You ruined everything!*” He steamed frustratedly.

“That’s not my fal-”

“Don’t say it’s not your fault! *You did this on purpose!*” Truesdale blew up in his gaslighting rage. He raised a fist to Jade – And slapped the air.

Jade froze. Truesdale wasn’t even close. In fact, he slightly tripped from missing by a mile. Jade was baffled, but Truesdale seemed to realize what happened and retreated to his room in such a way that the walls trembled.

Chase emerged from under a blanket on the top bunk. Chastity finally opened the bathroom door. Sundance sighed.

“He can’t see.” He said to Jade.

“I know, he just doesn’t get-”

“No, I mean, he can’t see, he’s blind.”

Jade blinked in shock. He had no idea.

Chapter 4

Meet Margalo

Jade wasn't sure what had gotten into Sundance, but the very next day, he was begging the boys to help him with some kind of homework. Perhaps he and Truesdale had made some sort of bet, but whatever the case, Sundance didn't explain.

Being grades behind, Chastity felt unworthy of aiding Sundance, and Chase just wasn't motivated. Jade would have little time after working in the kitchen for Heather, but he gave in. They planned to visit the campus library to see what it had in store for them before it closed up for the night.

"Well, just so you know," G.L, a zealous reader, tipped them, peering over his own back to add surmise. "that library, is supposedly *haunted*." He whispered the last word.

"Well Jade here is all about ghosts." Sundance tattled to G.L "So I guess I'll leave it to him."

"Sure." Jade jammed his hands in his pockets.

"How brave."

"What's with this?!" Sundance complained, rumpling his hair, then reaching for the shelves. He was looking for a particular English book, and yelling as he did so. Jade slinked back in his arm chair because he knew what was coming next.

The young librarian, "Pidge" Masters, stepped daintily out from behind the packed bookcases.

"Can we have a small bit of silence?" He hissed, his large, liquidy eyes appeared to roll around in his head, rather than move side to side. He blew a strand of forest-tinted hair out of his face, and slipped away before Sundance could counter.

Alexis and her big brother, Addison, whom she affectionately called Addy, were sitting across from Jade on the cozy, rust-red, over-stuffed cushions of the library sofas, reading magazines.

Sundance was sighing loudly by the shelves; The library had such a large collection of titles under the same subjects, even Pidge's scrutinous alphabetizing didn't necessarily get you what you wanted.

"Why don't you just ask Pidge for help?" Alexis suggested smugly.

"Why don't you just lend me *your* copy!" Sundance retorted snappishly, diving into the bookshelf with annoyance.

Addison glanced up from his water sports magazine. He was a rather good-looking guy with dark eyes and long, coffee-pigmented hair dripping down his shoulders. If his ocean-breeze cologne, deep tan, and seat shared with an umber ukulele didn't tell you what he was about, nothing would.

“Pidge is a good dude if you give him a chance.” Addison smirked at his sister like it was an inside joke; they’d known Pidge since childhood. Sundance discarded the comment anyway.

“You know Pidge?” Jade asked the siblings.

“Do I?” Addison grinned; his teeth were superbly white. Alexis shot him a look. “Yep. Since we were little, he, Truesdale and I, we used to be quite the trio.”

“Really?! What happened?”

The question seemed to distort the richly colored room. Addison got shadowy and nostalgic.

“Haven’t heard the story, eh?”

“Guess not...” Jade blinked, watching Alexis’s eyes automatically water. Addison exhaled.

“Before the three of us were transferred to Donogan Academy, we’d gone to a public school on the other side of town, that was what? Two years ago?” He glanced at his sister.

“Three, Addy.” Alexis cleared her throat wistfully. Addison threw his magazine back onto the coffee table.

“The three of us had been present for a school shooting,” Addison recalled melancholy. “Pidge and I were late for home room that day, and heard the commotion before getting close enough to the action. Never saw the results, thank God. Truesdale wasn’t as fortunate, but I’d say he’s fortunate enough. It’s the reason he’s blind. Coulda been killed though, I wish he’d realize just how lucky he is.”

Jade had no idea what to say, but he forced himself to say something.

“I’m sorry about that, I can’t imagine what that must be like.”

“Me neither,” Addison agreed. “it was scary enough just being under the same roof, Truesdale is damn lucky... So damn lucky.” He finished.

“Bah! I can’t find anything!” Sundance rasped in disdain, venturing through the book paradise. The auburn rooms were lit by sun down, buttering the ornately placed furniture, rugs, and stain glass lamps. Broad-bladed ceiling fans hung far from claustrophobic in the tall, opulent, central hall.

Jade skimmed through titles selecting a potential hardcover from high on a shelf, but lost grip. Before he could even bend over, the book was back in its’ rightful place.

Pidge was there, motionless, with a hard to read expression on his exterior. His sky-blue eyes bored through the air, lids looking more like linen stretched over the shiny orbs in his face.

“Excuse me gentlemen,” He wheezed softly. “but could you be ever so kind as to tell me what you are looking for, *instead of tearing apart my library?!*”

“Sorry.” Jade forced over the turbulence. He nudged Sundance. Pidge glared ruefully, it was enough to make Sundance hide behind Jade, but he still took out his list and ranted the titles he was searching for.

“This way,” Pidge instructed. The boys loitered in hesitation, as the librarian went swimming off, they could only keep up with the wisp of his white coat until they found him on the staircase which was elaborately carpeted in royal red. It was then that Jade realized that Pidge was barefoot. He was always barefoot.

“Come along,” The librarian sang, flying up the steps.

The second level of the book-cathedral was immersed in flowering light coming from the sky panels. Out the large windows, one could stand shoulder to shoulder with the canopy.

“Beautiful up here.” Jade evaluated. Pidge may have glanced at him, but Jade wasn’t sure.

“Now what were you looking for?” Pidge’s eyes rose to the heavens like he wasn’t even talking to anyone anymore. Sundance began to serve titles again, but Pidge boredly ignored this.

“No, no, that’s not what you want, *I* know what you want, here-” He dove for the shelves, rambling as they wandered into the sunlight. The many colors of his foresty hair shimmered from verde, to gold, to copper, then back. His sweet-olive skin was embraced by russet shadows and his sapphire eyes just glowed; he was a rather unique being and his twenty-four karat rings, bangles, and anklets told the boys that it was because he was from a foreign land. Jade was about to ask what foreign land, when Pidge handed him a heavy stack of potential reading material.

Pidge led the two all over the second story of the library, dishing out English manuals, grammar books, creative writing books, and even literature magazines. At times the librarian would hold a publication like a skilled storyteller, and recite something of importance to Sundance. Jade soon recognized that the librarian wasn’t as grouchy as people thought he was – he just needed someone to talk to!

As Pidge was busy heckling Sundance with classic Shakespeare, Jade paused to gape at the wondrous sunshine. The view out the grand windows was aweingly satisfactory.

Suddenly, Jade noticed a big leather bound book leaning against the window sill. He picked it up, still facing the view...

“Here to study, or stare out the window, Mr. Jewel?”

Jade’s curiosity for the book was cut short as his adrenaline bled – It was Ambrose Godwin, standing stiff, tall, and with an impatient look about his face. His graying hair was pulled into a ponytail, reminding Jade of the old-English colonial men from wood-cuts and sketches.

“Sir, I uh...”

“Are you going to stand there and stutter or get back to studying?”

While Jade was thinking of something crafty to say, Mr. Godwin's eyes unexpectedly lit.

"Oh? That book in your hands... "

Jade restrained from throwing it across the library, but Mr. Godwin took it off his plate, making Jade bite his tongue behind his lips, for he didn't even know what was inside...

The teacher licked a finger before leafing through the pages. Jade prayed it wouldn't have a Pandora's box effect.

He frowned.

"Should you really be reading ghost stories?" Ambrose spat in a poisonous tone. "Inconceptual waste of time... "

"I like ghosts." Jade courageously spoke up. Godwin stopped, thinking and blinking in total disregard. Alexis came to Jade's rescue.

"Hey, boy!"

The teacher and student went about their own ways.

"*Careful!*" Alexis snapped, throwing a glance the way Godwin left. "Somethin's in that man's head – if he decides he doesn't like you, class is going to be *hell*."

"Math is already hell, isn't it? But someone's gotta take him on, right?" Jade slid a grin, sticking his tongue out.

He suddenly realized Alexis was taller and stronger looking than he; She was a year and a half older after all, but it made things feel all backwards.

"God you scare me sometimes."Alexis released a breath.

Although it was late, Pidge allowed Jade and Sundance to stay after hours, since he only lived upstairs and could easily lock up whenever needed.

Jade and Sundance sat down to their homework in a comfy, luxuriant lounge on the first floor next to a huge window looking out to the private courtyard, furnished with bird baths and houses.

While Sundance anxiously scribbled away at his homework, Jade opened the leather back book over his folders and textbooks. He began to read the history of Donogan Academy... It was perplexing as to why Godwin had called the book a ghost story, but perhaps he was still missing a point. As he read the interesting historical documentation, every now and then, he glanced out the window where the stylish courtyard sat. It was fairly blustery now, sunset was upon them, and the dead pine needles scattered from boughs to the pavement; There had been pine cones there earlier that morning, but they were now

all hung in the garden, coated with peanut butter and bird seed. Jade wondered if Pidge was the avid birdwatcher.

Page after page, Jade read...The campus had apparently seen it all.

There it was – the young man's bawling.

Jade let his breath sink out. The girl's dorm was right behind the library, and behind that, the giant rock where the boy grieved. Right on cue, Blaze was out on the back porch, singing.

"Uh, hey, Sundance, I'm gonna go say hi to Blaze, I'll be back in a sec."

"Right." He replied absentmindedly.

Jade kicked into gear, thoughts running rampant.

If what he'd just read about Donogan Academy was true, then the ghost on the campus grounds was a young man called Lave Santos who'd come back from war to his home, only to find his family and neighbors wiped out by yellow fever. He grieved in his home town for months before selling it to Maxwell Donogan's great, great, Grandfather. The history book did not, however, mention any one by the name of Stan A. Solve. Stan A. Solve was not the soldier's name, nor any of the Victorian houses former, or following recipients. The book even mentioned past slaves, gardeners, and friends of the original owners, but no one went by the name of Stan A. Solve.

This was a disappointment to Jade, for if the name had showed up, he would have known for sure if he was a psychic or not.

Either way, Jade was off to see if the boy's face was identical to that of the young man's photo in the book, but when Jade got to the rock, he found that the sobbing was distant... More towards the walkway to the boy's dorm where the footsteps had begun the first night he had seen the ghost. Did the ghost have some sort of pattern that it wandered in? If so, it would still go to the big rock in the back of the girl's dorm. Jade waited for it.

It did not immediately happen. He sooner encountered a rat run by in the dark, and he gasped to see a group of teens walking back for curfew, smoking cigarettes. He was torn between confronting them, and leaving it alone, knowing they'd hate a tattler. He remained silent and guilty.

A few more minutes bore him getting jumped on by a slimy spring peeper, but then, just as Jade thought, the filmy figure; Whom was most definitely Lave Santos, came shambling a path from the boy's dorm, dragging the barrel of his longgun through the dirt – but he turned off early, into the cumbersome forest thicket, the campus birding trail, which was off limits after dark... But it didn't

matter, because with the ghost's chilling visual, and clattering chains, Jade was so rattled to see it, his perception became disorganized, and the boy evaporated from sight.

It made Jade ponder where Lave Santos being a prisoner came into the story. But that was it.

Jade went to say hi to Blaze as promised, then returned to the library.

Sundance swiped his glasses off, polishing them with his shirt.

"Didn't you just come in before?"

"Er... Nope. Maybe it was the *ghost*." Jade jested nonchalantly, taking his seat back.

"Likely." Sundance began clearing up his paperwork.

There was a sudden thump from within the library...

"Pidge?" Jade hollered. Nothing. He shrugged. "Swear this place is haunted."

"Don't say that." Sundance muttered frantically.

The boys cleared out and went to find Pidge so he could close up for the night. They thanked him for letting them stay after hours and then he waved them good day at the double-doors, shutting them out with the tinkle of a chain-link.

When the boys entered the dim dusk, they immediately heard rustles in the bushes. All of the pine cone bird feeders had been knocked out of the Gardenia branches. Sundance swallowed and started moving faster...

Foot steps were coming up the path – from both forward and behind... The noises began closing in on them when all of the sudden...

A fluffy little dog jumped out of the monkey grass.

At the same time, Florian came strolling back from cello practice from the opposite direction.

Sundance and Jade must have been pale, for the first thing Florian said, was: "What happened to you guys?"

"Nothing-we-were-just-in-the-library." Sundance squeaked, giving a quick glance to the stray mutt. Florian hadn't even spotted it yet.

"Naw, it looks like you two just saw a- "

Sundance fell over with a thud.

"Ghost." Florian finished.

Sundance was taken to Janice Fonda, the school nurse, by Florian. Sundance was completely fine, and repulsed to oblige, but Florian insisted.

Jade stayed to look around for the matted, underweight, Shih Tsu, that had come to embezzle herself some peanut-buttery treats.

As Jade sauntered the blackness, he couldn't help but think about the ghost, and that maybe Godwin knew more about the haunted school grounds.

He jolted at the sudden sight of the little, dark-chocolate dog again, and chuckled at himself.

Luring her back to the dorm with the pieces of toaster tarts he armed himself with, Jade gave her his hand to sniff, hoping she wouldn't just snip it off, but she was as friendly as could be.

He was able to nab the pup and take her back to the room to bathe and clip out all of the horrible tangles and burrs in her fur. She gladly drank some fresh water, and gobbled up all the spare snacks Jade could find. It was sad to see this nice of a dog in such absurd condition.

It was a darn good thing that Truesdale had left since Jade knew he wouldn't have stood for this kind of rule breaking. Chastity was unsure; a bit timid about being caught with the dog, but Chase was totally melted by the sweetheart, even offering to let the poor dog sleep at the foot of his bed. The three went to sleep before Sundance returned, but Jade was sure he'd be fine with sharing the room with a creature in need.

Jade was awoken with the whack of a pillow. He shot up, causing the lapdog to bark at Sundance for assaulting her rescuer.

“Jade! What were you *thinking!* We can’t have animals in the dorm! When did you get yourself a *poodle*!?”

“It looks nothing like a poodle.”

Bang. Bang. Bang. Went the door. The boys jumped. The dog yipped. Jade threw a sheet over her, she began sniffing loudly.

“Yes!?” Sundance asked, grinning fakely as he peered outside.

“Good Morning boys,” Sebastian paused sternly. “care to tell me what you’re shouting about this early? And... Did I hear a dog?”

“Uh...”

“Nope.” Chastity pitched in. “We were, uh... Just foolin’ around, y’ know? Rompin’ like a pack-o-wolves!”

“Uh, um...” Jade hated to lie, but he played along, lifting his chin. “awooooo!”

Sebastian gave them the “look” then carried on. Sundance snapped the door shut.

“Jade,” He said. “DO SOMETHING!”

After school and another round of cooking with Ms. Heather, Jade came back to the dorm to find "Margalo" sleeping soundly. He forgoed his treat from Heather to feed the little ragamuffin, then devoted the last of his free time before bed to posting lost dog comments online. He wrote up some lost dog fliers, then called it a day.

Margalo couldn't have been a more gracious guest. She was laid-back, didn't bite, didn't growl, and was already house-broken. Often, she was just a pile of fluff lying in the middle of the floor for the boys to trip over. Sundance and Chastity teased her a lot, but there wasn't much that bothered this dog. She was just glad to have a roof over her head.

The only problem with Margalo was that she could be a howler. She loved to sing along with the boys, and also barked at the perpetrator when they had disagreements. It was a miracle that the boys kept her a secret, but it would only be until they could find her owner, so they were keen to enjoy her company while it lasted.

Jade got into the habit of walking Margalo either at night, or in the rain, when no one else was around to get them busted. He began to enjoy these escapades, calling them his "rain dances"- the code that he was slipping out with their secret canine.

As everyone else ran for cover, Jade hit the great outdoors, getting soaked, and not minding at all.

One day when Jade was taking Margalo out to do her business, they ambled past the big rock in the back of the girl's dorm. It had just stormed, and Margalo's paws were quickly getting muddy, but of course Jade didn't care - he was jumping in the puddles too.

As he made his way around the rock, he suddenly thought he'd caught the sight of Maxwell Donogan, turning the corner, but he was gone as soon as he appeared.

Jade must've imagined the man... But now something else glinted for Jade's attention under the shade of the enormous stone. The rain had washed the dirt away, revealing a shiny, gold box and it's super-intricate, curly-cue designs. He picked it up, brushed it off, turned it over and over, he tried to open it, but it was stuck shut.

With voices coming down the walk, Jade pocketed the item and ran to grab Margalo before the other students could see her.

The golden box awaited Jade in the drawer under the bed for quite some time, as he'd gotten caught up in a "date" with Alexis, which was a casual outing as promised. In fact, Addison came along; he drove them down to the local beach access for a Saturday of fun. Jade and Alexis swam while Addison surfed. Jade built sandcastles while Alexis sunbathed and Addison surfed some more.

Jade and Alexis talked over turkey sandwiches and lemonade. Alexis told Jade about her parents, whom she loved very much, and about her darling West highland terriers that she had to leave at home. Since she happened to mention it, Jade confided to her about Margalo. He also got to tell her about all of his paranormal experiences over the last past weeks.

She laughed skeptically, calling him eccentric. She meant well, she just didn't believe.

The day went swell for everyone, except for Addison who had to be dragged back to land to drive them back to campus.

Blaze, whom was crushing on Jade, worried that Alexis had beaten her to him; she went to talk to Jade right away, upset that, "Of course, she'd be over-looked by a blond, blue-eyed girl."

"What is that even supposed to mean?" Jade said, entirely flummoxed. He knew nothing about how girls stereo-typed themselves, but he looked her squarely in her warm, brown eyes.

"Come on, chocolate's super cool."

Jade was eager to get back to see how Margalo faired the day with the other boys, but Jade got caught up in a lively conversation with Sebastian in the hallway. By the end of it, Jade was sure he'd convinced the Professor to continue to study more psychology, write books, and travel to Africa.

He returned to the dorm in high spirits, and found Margalo sleeping at the foot of Chase's bed again. He gave her a scratch and she licked his fingers, making him smile at the slobber.

Suddenly remembering the golden object he'd found, Jade grew excited and went straight for it.

He was about to crack open the mysterious, gold box, when there was a sudden, hectic, knock on the dormitory door – He was sure someone had busted him with Margalo.

It was Janice; still in her white coat, with peach-blond hair pinned up. Her blue eyes had a concerned tinge of gray.

"Jade Jewel, I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Chapter 5

Godwin's Spell

Alexis, and a few other select students who Jade did not know the names of, were waiting outside the red-brick hospital with bouquets of roses, colorful envelopes, and get-well letters from students who couldn't make it.

The sky was an empty blue. Below, every flower bush in sight was planted in a squared-off row. The sidewalk was bleached to perfection, and the walls of the hospital were pressure-washed, spotless. Windows reflected the over-cleansed environment.

Jade came running up, covered in dirt and grass stains, the cut on his cheek from a bramble was utterly ignored. He apologized for being late.

Alexis sighed and dusted him off. He coddled the upside-down paper bag in his fists.

“What on Earth are you bringing Ms. Heather?!” One of Alexis’s friends wrinkled her nose.

“A home-made bouquet!” Jade said proudly. *“It’s delicate.”* He explained of its’ rigid handling.

They all went inside where they were greeted by Janice, then led to a patient’s room, dull and white. Heather was very happy to see every one, though she looked very tired and uncomfortable. She had taken a bad fall and Janice was worried that she may get stuck in a wheel chair for quite some time. Donogan Academy would be hiring a new cook.

“I could do it!” Jade offered. *“You taught me all the recipes!”*

Heather laughed for the first time since seeing her like this.

“Goodness no! School and all... far too much for you to do... ” Heather blinked away her bleariness as Jade gingerly unveiled his gift: a bouquet of clovers and dandelion puffs. She took it tearily, smiling as she held them.

“How thoughtful... ”

“Go ahead, wish on ‘em!” Jade cheered her on.

Janice exhaled exasperatedly, but was too touched to stop anyone. Heather paused before blowing her first wish away.

“I wish... That nice boys and girls like you could stay young, and happy, and healthy forever.”

Back at Jade’s dorm, things were getting tough with Margalo. It had been awhile since he’d put an ad out for a lost, dark brown, female, Shih Tsu, and the boys had gotten pretty attached, but now Godwin

was on their scent, and they *really* did not want to get busted by him. With Godwin closing in, it was determined Margalo must go, even for her own safety, but then Jade got an idea.

Since Godwin only threatened the boys' dormitories, he decided to present the dog to Blaze.

Blaze was never the same again. Jade stopped hearing her sad, out-of-tune melodies at night. She instead took Margalo to the park on weekends to sing joyful duets. They were now a pair of gals who'd been breathed back into life.

Long after Margalo was gone, Jade still took walks in the quiet, commotionless-rain, and in the willowy, pearl-lit evening, sometimes listening to the befuddling sobs of a ghastly refugee who asked Jade to call himself Stan A. Solve so he could come rescue him... But of course, there was nothing Jade could do.

As was vowed to Berry, Jade took a day out to the football field to watch one of the team's games. He found Averell, Connie, and G.L sitting in the bleachers.

Acknowledging them, Jade took a seat nearby.

"Hi," He greeted. "hey, isn't that Sherry girl usually with you?"

Connie pointed down to the trampled-grass field, where the team was crashing helmets.

"She's somewhere down there."

"She plays?" Jade was struck into saying so.

"Yeah, sometimes. The coach decided to let her since there's no where and no one else for her to practice with."

"Cool."

"Not really, you can barely pick her out. Doesn't know her own strength."

Averell chuckled. G.L just nodded along as he tapped ferociously at a laptop.

Jade was astonished to see a little green parrot on G.L's shoulder. He said his conures stayed with his Mom to avoid breaking dorm regulations, but they were all his on holidays and weekends. As the game progressed, Jade got to talk more to G.L, whom he found out was all about reading, writing, and birds. Aside from being a birdwatcher, and parrot keeper, G.L was also a walking, talking thesaurus with a bonus dictionary. Every conversation involving G.L, ended with his conclusion: "I could write a book about that!"

Next time Sundance needed help with an English project, Jade knew the guy to go to. When he asked what G.L stood for, G.L dusted his sleeves, straightened his suspenders, and fixed the blue-blockers atop his pecan-hued hair.

“Nothing.” He smirked. “It just makes me sound like a writer.”

Jade spoke to the girls too; Connie was very much into fashion, loved swimming, the beach, she took hula dancing lessons, and played a lot of volley ball.

Averell was shyer and didn’t share herself as much, though it didn’t stop her from flirting with Jade. She wanted to talk more about him than herself, and she kept scooting closer to him until Connie had to save him by asking Averell to go give Sherry her water thermos that she’d forgotten up in the bleachers.

The game was tied when Jade looked up to see the teams getting back into formation after a time-out. The coach blew the whistle and the players began again – but faltered after a confusing shout from the coach.

“Hey! Hey! Stop it! Get it!”

It took a moment for Jade to catch on – but then he couldn’t believe his eyes.

It was Margalo! Running across the huge football field, hunting down the game’s prized possession.

The teams abandoned the game, foolishly romping about the grass trying to catch the dog that now had their football.

It wasn’t long before Blaze came dashing up in tears over Margalo’s disappearance.

“She’s there! She’s there!” Jade pointed, jumping down into the field to chase, too. G.L began talking into a plastic spoon, counting the yards that Margalo ran.

“And he SCORES! The dog SCORES!” He roared into the “microphone”. “And the crowd goes *WILD!*”

The crowd was already going wild – wild with laughter. It was Malcolm Dion that finally grabbed Margalo and raised her high in the air like a player who’d won them a game. Blaze went cantering up to Malcolm who grinned as he forked Margalo over. She hugged Margalo like a fuzzy teddy bear.

“I was taking her out and she saw the boys with the ball, and just shot off.” Blaze explained to Jade.

The commotion was an upbeat one, but Jade was uneasy about what might happen now that Margalo was found out.

The coaches and adults who’d been witness to the whole thing were in the midst of discussing where to send Margalo off to, Blaze hysterically pleaded to keep her.

Jade stopped everybody in their tracks.

“We can’t get rid of this dog! *This is the team mascot!*”

The coach paused for a minute - but he’d been hit just right.

In the end, Blaze got to keep Margalo. Margalo had to stay in the main office of Donogan Academy, but Blaze became the sole caretaker of the football team’s new mascot, who joined them at the gym, for drills, and of course took pictures with the team and their fans. She appeared on signs for the newly named football team: The Howlers.

The funny incident with Margalo appeared in the school newspaper thanks to Milly, G.L.’s sister, whom was also a writer. A lot of the comments were by her beau, Josh, whom was part of the team, and happened to be the biggest animal-lover on campus. Josh was a pretty cool and humorous guy, and he profusely thanked Jade for proposing the idea for a team mascot. Margalo’s presence seemed to keep everyone on better behavior. You couldn’t help but chuckle whenever you saw her fuzzy little, mischievous face.

Josh invited Jade to come spend the day at a pet shop where he had a part-time job. With G.L and Milly in tow, the four had an awesome time at *Redhood’s pets*. Everyone they met, loved hearing about the Margalo story, and Jade was thrilled to meet the boss and her fetching, basketball playing, Green Wing Macaw.

Milly spent all her time cuddling bunnies and hamster pups, while Josh walked around with ferrets and lizards on his shoulders (not at the same time of course!). G.L cooed at the fowl, squawked at the parrots, and whistled to the canaries.

The sounds of yipping puppies, squeaking avians, and excited children filled the store. Jade could smell the alfalfa, disinfectants, and bulk birdseed. There were sweet, interactive little creatures at every turn, but the hardest being for Jade to walk away from, was a super-friendly cockatiel that wouldn’t leave him alone. He was very close to buying the bird that he felt a strange connection with, but decided against it for fear of what might happen if Godwin continued to be on his case; things had worked out for Margalo, but that didn’t mean he’d get away with keeping an animal for a second time. He left the pet shop a little dejected, but he let it go, because back at campus, Florian would be awaiting him at the tennis courts.

They played until sunset.

On their way to dinner, Jade suddenly realized that within these first weeks of school, he had made many good friends. There may have been drama, lows, and disappointments, but with the stress of the new school year beginning to fade, the bullying got more portioned. Blaze who'd become compadres with Berry and Malcolm, reported that the team had been a lot more harmonious since the fiasco with Margalo. Even the members who had mercilessly taunted Jade and Florian had forgotten all about them. There was always Truesdale, but now that he was absent from the dorm, Jade only ever saw him in class or passed him in the hallway.

Jade believed that the danger had finally past.

But it had not...

He was still a member of Ambrose Godwin's math classes.

"Sir, what you said in the library the other day-"

"That was weeks ago Mr. Jewel, goodness you have a bad memory. At least I'm old... "

"...You called that book a ghost story, but-"

"It was the history of Donogan Academy? Yes, of course. All histories are ghost stories, fraught with death, war and the ill-intent of human beings. I am a math teacher for a reason, Mr. Jewel, not a history teacher. I hate history. Now be on your way, Jewel, you are wasting my time-"

"Have you ever heard of Stan A. Solve?"

"Never. You are the first to declare such a fable. Now get, we only have so many minutes in a day, Mr. Jewel!"

Godwin was handing back homework.

"An *F*, Mr. Truesdale."

He was talking to Sundance.

"This is the third time this week. Can you get *anything* through that head?"

Jade tried to lighten the situation.

"Hey, fun, fabulous, fair, and fantastic all begin with F"

The class laughed, some with Jade, some at him.

"It could also stand for fuck you." Someone wheedled in. Sundance rubbed his temples as the class got rowdy and laughed even harder.

Godwin shot a glance at them all.

"By all means it should stand for fantastic." Jade whispered.

Godwin may have lost his temper, but he held his tongue.

On another day when class was given common core math sheets to complete, Jade became annoyed and aware of the extraneous information in the mathematics. Did it really matter who and what had these many bananas, apples, and oranges? He just wanted to do the dang math problem.

Jade verbalized his complaint, and Godwin accused him of having a lethargic problem-solving threshold.

“Deal with it. Maybe it will inspire you to move quicker.”

“Or maybe, *it's a waste of time*. We only have so many minutes in-”

“Rome wasn't built in a day, Mr. Jewel, and neither is anybody's head.”

“Yeah, but they didn't have 3-D printing!”

Jade and Florian hit a highly symmetrical high-five.

Jade's quirkiness spread into other classes.

He was given a reprimand in history for not knowing answers because he “wasn't there”.

He was asked to sit in the back of the class after asking the geography teacher if he “ever went to any of these countries”.

He was suspended from English class because he was sure that creative writing was creative, and didn't follow every rule in the grammar book.

He was thrown out of chemistry for proving the teacher wrong about the extensions of the periodic table.

He corrected the professor in physics.

He gave a better summary of environmentalism than the association brought in to explain it.

What drove the staff crazy was that this arrogant boy ironically had perfect grades; He turned his homework in, even if he did not believe in the answers.

They tried to declare him gifted, so they could send him on his way, but the principal was skeptical due to Jade's terrible acting when he got there. Jade even began to feel a little bad about it.

All of this outspokenness was getting on Truesdale's nerves for whatever reason – Jade wasn't so lucky in the halls anymore.

“You can't just talk to teachers the way you've been! Don't let those good grades get to your head, you are being a *fool*, Jade.”

It wasn't his straight As that were inspiring his behavior, Jade was just a free spirit with a mind of his own – it was increasingly beginning to show as time went on.

He continued to make daring comments to disheartening teachers, he defended victimized class mates, aided failing students, and caused rebellious outbursts when things weren't making sense. He was loved and hated by peers, some teachers sympathized him, while others vouched for his demise.

He was becoming the infamous "kid in the red jacket", the dubious "Captain Chocolate", "The boy who ran fast", because he was always getting away with things. He was also informally known as the "Jewel kid", or "Gem child", but just plain "kid" was people's favorite.

His clothes were stained with blood and grass as he was battered about, resisting anyone and anything who tried to "turn him into a zombie".

His true colors showed when he was asked to move his lips at a music lesson where he was supposed to be being taught how to sing.

"So you just want me to *shut up*?" He said to the teacher for the whole choir to hear.

The woman was so embarrassed and angry she smacked him with her baton leaving Jade with a mark that ultimately got her job taken away.

"Thanks." Florian praised Jade, for he and his orchestra buddies had suffered with that conductor for far too long.

Jade sighed.

"Don't worry, I'm starting to think that this is my calling. This could really be a thing, you know?"

"Hopefully, a good thing" Florian slightly poked at his inflation.

This is exactly what Alexis had feared. Every time she heard a clamor in the hall, it was Jade and the bullies, or Jade and a teacher. He battled with words and was just too clever. He'd get beat up, but he wouldn't swing back. Love was his weapon, but Alexis had to admit, those rose-tinted glasses were not saving him from the bloodshed. She decided to have a talk with him before something drastic happened. But it was too late.

Truesdale protested to Janice that there was "something wrong with the boy", and so she asked Jade to come to her office for a check-up. Jade was not impressed by her suggestion.

"So one just pops a pill to avoid being a problem for others? Tantalizing."

Janice was flabbergasted, but distracted by Godwin's entry, he was looking for an extra aspirin.

He saw Jade.

"Oh? What has happened now? Someone take a viola to your head?" His austerity cracked a grin.

Jade was glad to hear that Mr. Godwin had a sense of humor, but he was a little unnerved by what came next.

“Let me handle this boy, Ms. Fonda, I think I can talk some sense into this child.”

Jade was led into a dim office cluttered with antiques, ancient books, and paperwork. There were handsome, quality, wood works, clocks, old artifacts, and framed medals. Newspaper clippings, documents, famous papers, cuttings from 1800’s science magazines, and historic letters engulfed the walls. This was Ambrose’s personal office, and it baffled Jade to see all of the aging inventions of the past.

“I thought you hated history.” Jade said pointedly, examining a rusted oil lamp.

“I do indeed. Did I fail to mention it was the war and inhumanity of it I so dispute?”

Jade’s gaze wandered from Ambrose to the collection. He didn’t dare touch anything, but greatly admired the treasures.

“I don’t really like history either. We’ve come a long way, but ya gotta admit, we haven’t learned much.”

“That would be a common view.” Godwin stated the response like it was a tried and true fact. He instantly changed the subject.

“Jade, you have been fair, legal, and just. Why do you keep getting yourself into these messes?!”

“I don’t know.” Jade threw him a shrug.

“You have flattering grades, a bright future, *why do you keep messing around?!*”

“What?! So it’s *my fault?*”

“I don’t know! I just want to know *why?!*” Godwin demanded. “Why are you so disturbing?! Don’t you want to make it out of here in one piece?!”

Jade again, shrugged his folded arms.

“It would be nice... But it might not end up that way. Kids are suffering here. Whatever this is, it doesn’t work. It’s a broken machine.” Jade punctuated bravely.

Godwin paused amongst his model planes and vehicles, a vintage silver tea set sat reflectively on the oak desk while a ticking Grandfather clock and giant glass-faced bookcase towered over them. His light-blue eyes held a metallic gaze that just for a second, glimmered with an understanding of the deep, and awake boy.

“Go.” He said. “Get out of my office. You will never change.”

He was smiling.

Chapter 6

That Truesdale Character

Heather was feeling a lot better. Jade had volunteered to watch her for Janice one afternoon, pushing her wheelchair around the campus, enjoying the flower gardens and feeding the birds and squirrels. Jade told Heather about everything that had been going on since she was gone. She listened tenderly to every word, was considerate and praising of his courage to stand up *to*, and *for*, people, but like Alexis, she forewarned him.

“Pull a shamed man’s last straw and he will burst. Don’t get too bold, Jade, people are capable of vile things, and you don’t deserve to be in that crossfire.”

“I know, but if it means helping another soul, I’m willing to do whatever it takes!”

“You’re a spitfire, that’s for sure. Mind giving me some of that energy?” She laughed. Jade leaned over so that they could see each other’s faces.

“For real?”

“Why not?”

From across the parking lot, Alexis and Addison stepped out of Addison’s sleek, black, convertible to the sound and sight of Jade driving a speeding wheelchair.

“WHOOOHOOOO!!!” Heather cried.

Addison lowered his shades.

“It could only be the boy who ran fast.” He smirked.

Jade spent the next few days running himself raw, trying to help people out in anyway he could. The peers who worshiped him came to know him as a leader, for he was becoming something of one through his valuable deeds.

One morning, he was approached by Sherry, Connie, and another girl Jade was reminded to be Illiad, one of the Bronwyn siblings. Illiad and the girls begged Jade to help Illiad’s sister, Britt, whom was anxiety-filled over what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. She was failing in all her classes, and worst yet, dating Truesdale.

“I have *no* idea why she’s interested in a *boar* like him!” Illiad insulted. “He’s the *biggest liar* I’ve ever seen! Tell her to break up with that dragon! Leave him in the dust! It’s major heart-break time! Oh *please* convince her he’s not who she thinks he is – you seem to be good with these things!”

Jade was just slightly intimidated.

“I’ve never made a dent in Truesdale,” He admitted. “but if Britt is in trouble, I’ll try, I guess.”

“Thank you Jade! Thank you *so* much!” Illiad fussed, flashing red, in hair and nails.

Jade approached Britt at lunch, asking if he could sit by her.

Her dirty-blond hair of shoulder-length almost matched her brown eyes. She had slightly weathered skin and a Motherish smile that she used on everybody, no matter how old they were. It was mirrored in her clothes which were similar in style to Heather’s, and she wasn’t embarrassed to wear straw hats, or overalls. She was the complete opposite of her gaudy sister.

She was happy to have the “school hero’s” company, but was kind of confused as to why. Jade was a little surprised when she took charge of the meeting, yakking on and on about how unhealthy the school lunches were, and how she had to bring her own. Jade knew this, he just never had the time to think about it, though he was slowly coming to the “organic side” as Britt rambled on.

Jade then shared tales of cooking behind the scenes with Ms. Heather. Britt was fascinated. She decided that she wanted to work for the chef, too. Jade laughed and had to tell the whole story, including the fact that the kitchen had a new cook, Ms. Fahrان. Britt was a tad dispirited, but went on to discuss school endeavors instead.

“I love Sebastian’s classes.” She gushed. It was the only class she was focused in.

“I really loved it when he was doing more of the psychology,” Jade commented passionately. “I actually continued to study it without him!”

“Really? I’m a little more into what he’s teaching now, biology is cool.”

“It’s a little creepy.” Jade chortled. Britt laughed at him, she began to rant about how she loved botany as well, but had fewer resources for it.

“Hey, what is your most favorite subject ever, if you could be anything, and nothing tied you down, what would you choose?” Jade tried to sound fantastical and airy. Britt paused.

“Botany...” Her eyes averted thoughtfully before swapping topics.

Britt then brought up friends.

She knew Connie, Sherry, Alexis, obviously Illiad, and because of Illiad, she knew Addison and Pidge as well. She happened to clarify that not many of the girls in the dormitories liked her, what she failed to mention, was that it was because Truesdale was her boyfriend.

“So, uh, how do you and Truesdale get along?” Jade pried. Britt exhaled softly.

"I know he can be harsh, but he's just a determined guy. Despite being blind and all, nothing takes him down! He's just so courageous, and he loves me the way I am."

As optimistic as Jade could be, he hardly believed that Truesdale loved anyone "just the way they were". Yes, he was determined, maybe he was courageous, but it often didn't get him anywhere. He had only ever seen Truesdale get his way by threat, not hard work.

"Eh, that's nice that you help him out and stuff, but-"

"Oh no," Britt bragged. "I don't help him at all, you see how he gets around, he learned how to do everything for himself. No cane, no service dog, he's very talented."

"Independent, ay?"

"Very much, he's got two jobs, and still doing school! Can you imagine? Blind with two jobs!"

"Um... So if he's so independent, where do you come into all of this?"

"Huh?" Britt sized chewing her spinach salad, swallowing with difficulty.

"Well I mean, if it's all about him, who are you?"

Jade could tell he'd struck a bad chord, but he was okay with that. The conversation lasted a short topic more, then Britt was done. She washed down her meal with a mini carton of whole milk then cleared the table top and headed for class. It was only then, Jade noticed Illiad sitting just a table over.

"I owe you one!" She flustered.

"I wouldn't thank me yet." Jade smiled weakly, hoping he hadn't hurt her feelings.

Britt was a difficult case. She truly had faith that there was something in Truesdale that others just weren't seeing. Sometimes, she was so convincing, Jade had to wonder if he was missing it. He sometimes felt shameful about nagging Britt, and having no hope in Truesdale, but according to Sundance, they had all rights to have no hopes. This rang with some truth, since Britt never saw what went down in the boys' dorms. Truesdale badmouthed, he was intolerable, and had an aptness to getting into fist fights, which was abuse of the martial arts lessons he took. He picked on students with no rhyme or reason, much like he had with Jade at the beginning of the school year. He did drugs and shared them with the vulnerable.

Truesdale wasn't going to change - and apparently neither was Britt.

It was almost laughable to Jade, because like Godwin proclaimed, *he* wasn't budging either.

It was at this time that Truesdale really began to hunt Jade. Truesdale may have been diabolic, but he wasn't dumb. He knew what Jade was trying to convince Britt of, and he was going to make Jade pay for it...

Truesdale knew that Jade's weakness was others' pain, so he started with the easiest target he could find: Sundance.

Sundance grew miserable, but wasn't shy to tell Jade why. He helped Jade to try to break up Britt and Truesdale, though he wasn't necessarily doing it for Britt's safety – Sundance wanted revenge...

Chase and Chastity were the next to be seeked. Chase sucked it up, but Chastity, whom was also currently stressing about his poor grades, began to get grouchy in turn. For awhile, he wouldn't even speak to Sundance because of his "evil brother".

Similar scenarios played out in the girls' dormitory. Britt was becoming more and more unpopular as Truesdale's image rotted. This was unfortunate, because as far as Jade could see, Britt was a perfectly nice person – and even nicer, without Truesdale around.

With all of the drama surrounding Truesdale, Jade held his breath at the unexpected sight of Mr. Maxwell Donogan.

Jade was sure the school owner had come to scold the senior student, or in the worst case – take him away, but upon closer inspection, it appeared Maxwell was here giving some kind of tour. He was speaking in an upbeat fashion, laughing loudly when he could.

The boys' dorm was fairly empty that late Friday, as it was likely that everyone had escaped to the beach before curfew. Jade himself had just returned from wheeling Heather around, and visiting Pidge at the library, but he was done with all that, and ready to clean up for supper.

He almost walked right past Donogan, when he noticed the teenager standing next to him, getting the tour...

She was terribly thin, pale, blushed with worry; her short blond hair was streaked with a bit of pink and green dye, smoothed around her head perfectly, almost shading out an eye. White jeans, a white blouse, electric-pink tennis shoes and a plastic, rose-pigmented backpack adorned her. Her other luggage consisted of a guitar case and computer bag, all decorated with dot-eyed characters from animes.

Jade questioned why Donogan would tour a girl through the gentleman's dorms, but he couldn't help but think that maybe Maxwell believed in the haunting spirits, and thought it'd make for a cool

conversation piece, after all, if he had seen him by the rock that one day, perhaps it was because he was snooping for ghosts.

Jade returned to the room to shower. He was leaving for mess hall when he opened the dorm room to a messy hall.

The big clatter he'd heard, was now a hot-magenta electric guitar that had spilled to the floor, along with picks, cords, a capo, a tuner, and other assorted doohickeys Jade did not recognize.

"Oops!" Jade smiled, helping the girl put it all back together.

"It – I, uh... Was heavy..." The pretty kid didn't even finish the already illiterate sentence. Jade thought nothing of it until the expensive instrument was packed away.

"Thanks." The girl mumbled, trying to lift the case again.

"Want some help? Where are you going with all this stuff?" Jade quizzically acknowledged the whimsical baggage. The teenager went all helpless as if something had been "found out". They coughed, they shuffled, and very, *very*, shyly, held out a hand to shake. It was the most fragile thing Jade had ever touched – he didn't even bother with the whole "manly handshake" thing, he just gently shook it up and down.

"H-hi, I'm the new s-student, I just arrived at Donovan Ac-cademy, I..."

"Oh yeah..." Jade recalled. "There was a new student due to come later in the year, you must be?" He rummaged his brain-library.

"Yohan Jones."

"Now I remember. Good to meet you Yohan, I'm Jade."

Yohan gave a little nod to acknowledge, and finally sneaked a look at Jade's face; Jade could finally see Yohan's. Yohan's eyes were a crystalline, ocean-green. It reminded Jade of something he'd seen a long time ago...

"Oh, wow..." He uttered reactively, embarrassed that he did. "Sorry, so um..."

Yohan continued onward, painstakingly dragging the bags off down the hallway. Before Jade could tell her she was in the wrong dorm, going down the wrong hall, to the wrong room, the dot-eyed peach featured on the front of her backpack became evident.

The sandy boys coming back from the beach spotted the new student with glee.

"Yo, Peaches!" Adrian called.

It stuck.

Turned out, Jade was wrong. Peaches had the right dorm, the right hall, and the instruction to take up the dorm room that Truesdale had evicted himself from. She, was actually a *he*, and he, soon became the talk of the school.

Peaches' new dorm mates were bewildered by the punky boy, though Jade didn't even think it was that bad. Chastity did not like Peaches, and neither did Sundance. Chase was just plain weirded out. Naturally, Jade gave the guy a chance, and as Peaches unpacked, they slowly got to know him, and found that he was more human than they were led to believe.

Peaches kept his reputation afloat by showing off his shredding skills, he could do an electric guitar remix of whatever you threw at him. He only had to hear a song once or twice before twanging it out from his glossy, magenta, electric guitar. He wrote, he sang, recorded, and composed. The only things he brought to school was his clothes, phone, laptop, microphone, and guitar. He was serious about music. "Awesome!" Jade complimented. "Maybe you should give us a rock and roll show some time."

Peaches dipped his head as though he were doing a little bow.

"I will," He smiled, holding back bubbling happiness. "I'd really like to."

Since it was the weekend, Peaches didn't start school until Monday, Jade could tell he was growing anxious about getting introduced to the rest of the students, because he pretty much didn't leave the dorm room all weekend, not even to eat. This deplored Jade wildly, but Peaches just smiled and said he wasn't hungry because he was nervous. Jade didn't take to the excuse well, since he himself, was oppositely, a nervous-eater. Despite Peaches' explanation, Jade brought food back from the cafeteria that night.

When the boys returned, Peaches was on his phone, and talked for a long time; He'd taken two calls, one in pure Japanese, and the other, in fluent Korean.

Peaches was abashed that Jade brought a meal to him all the way back from the mess hall. He thanked Jade profusely, but took a long time to finish it, picking at it meagerly the rest of the night.

Jade was curious about Peaches' polyglot.

"I'm part Japanese," Jade explained. "my great Grandmother survived Hiroshima. She was the last in the family to speak the language; Nana told me I should learn the language since my parents didn't continue to speak it, but I never got the chance."

"I could teach you some, if you want." Peaches was timid, but willing to share. Jade beamed with interest. He was beginning to see quite the friend in Peaches.

Peaches progressed sluggishly in winning over the rest of his dorm mates; Chastity eventually caved in to the opportunity to sing to live karaoke music, which Peaches gladly supplied.

It was fun, and funny, for the other boys to watch Chastity transform himself into Elvis.

Peaches was really into art as well. He'd started a manga with his pals in Nagoya, and illustrated children's books for his Dad, who wrote them. This impressed Chase, and so he let Peaches off the hook, too.

Sundance, however, was not buying any of it. He disliked Peaches' "girlishness", he was queasy about his sickliness, and he didn't like "this guy's vibe". Jade wouldn't judge Peaches that far, but he had to admit, Peaches was probably the sickest person he had ever seen – even when Peaches was smiling or laughing, there was still a haze about him, like he didn't feel like he could get any better than this – Jade knew he was looking at someone who was about to fall apart, someone who had seen little happiness in their life. Perhaps this was the reason Peaches found bright, bouncy, colorful things to be so attractive - what Jade didn't understand, was why all of the pink and ruff was worth it...

Before Peaches had even started school, Truesdale had found out about him. Truesdale thought so unfondly of Peaches' dressage, he took it as a humiliating insult to his personal masculinity. Twice that weekend, Peaches came darting back into the dorm room, clutching his trembling body. Truesdale stalked Peaches mercilessly with full intent to physically harm.

With no intention of telling anybody that Truesdale had gotten to him, Jade questioned Peach on Saturday when he'd asked to borrow a T-shirt from him.

Jade found Peaches' bloody tank top in the laundry thereafter.

Brave Florian, brought Truesdale's latest crimes to light by getting Sebastian involved. Sebastian brought it up to the principal, whom brought the situation to Maxwell Donogan, whom spoke to the notoriously violent student himself.

Truesdale was given one week to clean himself up.

Steaming, he lie low. Everyone felt like they could breathe again.

Despite the tumult, Britt still clung to Truesdale, having seen nothing, and only hearing *his* side of the story, which was predictably, dramatized in favor of self-sympathy.

Jade gave up. He was tired of Truesdale, and didn't have time for someone who was never going to change. It was time to look towards better things.

“I need a circle bed.” Jade complained to Sundance on Saturday, at the park.

“A what?”

“A circle bed, y’ know? So it doesn’t have any bad sides to wake up on.”

“You really are a weirdo.” Sundance shook his head.

The Saturday morning Peaches was popped by Truesdale, Peaches kept disappearing throughout the day, looking for somebody. Even around 12:00 p.m, Peaches left the room and returned fifteen minutes later, discouraged, but he went to sleep. Jade’s lids finally fell, thinking not much of it.

On Sunday, the same routine occurred, and around midnight, Jade followed. With the direction that Peaches was going, Jade was dead-sure he must have found out about the ghost – but Peaches took an unexpected turn towards the front of the school, where a security cruiser was parked at the edge of the sidewalk. It was always there at around midnight, Jade just never paid attention. He even recognized the night guard that was just getting out to do his rounds, he had just never talked to him.

Peaches ran up to the man like they were old friends. Jade could hear the man laugh and tell Peaches to “Get some sleep one day.”

Peaches and the officer talked a little, and then the man sent him back the way he came. Jade flew back to the shadows before Peaches knew he’d tagged along – or so he thought.

“Did you follow me last night?” Peaches accused Jade, Monday morning. Jade was not one to lie.

“Yeah, sorry, I was worried. How’d you know?”

“The dorm room door was closed. I left it open a crack.”

“Wow, you’re observant. So, you know the night guard?”

“Yeah. You’ll find out later...” Was Peaches’ reply.

The boys went to breakfast, and Peaches finally came with, but he drank a carton of milk, ate half a small orange and was done. When Jade and the boys came back to collect book bags, Peaches was in the bathroom throwing up.

Jade told the others not to be late, and stayed until Peaches was through. The meek boy wouldn’t look at Jade as he emerged, he just quietly scrambled for his bag.

Jade already had it ready for him. Jade walked with Peaches.

“Nervous?” Jade asked. Peaches nodded, but he was now having a harder time believing that Jade had waited for him...

No one would have guessed what transpired only moments before, as Peaches stood in front of home room, introducing himself.

“I’m Yohan Sadie Jones, but you can call me Peaches!”

The class roared but he didn’t care.

“My Dad is Spencer Jones, the officer whom works night shift and security at Donogan Academy...”

The bullies grumbled in irritation.

Jade knew Peaches meant to make a show of this to save his skin, but he hoped Peaches knew that it wouldn’t last forever.

Jade saw Peaches in many of the same classes.

At lunch, Peaches was mostly left alone, except for a couple girls who came to comment that his style was funny and cute, but many of them stayed away, not knowing what to think.

The bullies plotted on ways to destroy Peaches from a distance, since he was deemed “untouchable” because of his coppish Father. He became the center of gossip and extreme verbal abuse, causing Peaches to walk on eggshells in the hallways, sometimes biting his lip so hard, it bled. Peaches ran from class to class when he could; he had to go all the way back to the dorm room to use the restroom, and he never walked a crowded hall without first seeing a friendly face – which for him, was far and few.

The teachers were the worst. They acted like he was an animal or a five-year old. Some refused to speak to him, and others began to behave very oddly around him, to the point that Peaches avoided confrontation of any kind.

In the dorm room Peaches was different, as if not even in his body; he was such a heavy daydreamer, he would spill his coffee, sit through alarms, the school bell, and other such things. While loud noises could make the other boys jump in surprise, Peaches could lounge through a parade of ambulances like it was a fish aquarium. Sundance often joked about this characteristic of Peaches’.

“A comet could hit the Earth, and he’d be like, *whatever*.”

This was of course, an exaggeration, but in the end, Jade and Florian became Peaches’ only friends, for no one else cared to be involved with whatever was going through Peaches’ head.

Jade sensed this boy had seen things he cared not to speak of – it showed in all the ways he used his eccentricities to cope.

He was difficult to understand, and he knew he had a long road ahead of him if he was to ever touch ground with those that did not care to empathize. At least Jade could see this, because no, Peaches wasn't unenlightened, he was *tired*.

Chapter 7

Saving Peaches

Once Peaches was settled in, things were very different. The shock of his abnormality wore off, the bullies became bolder, and shamelessly went in for the kill. The scare of Mr. Jones being Peaches' Father no longer had affect, for it was figured out Peaches was adopted. Technically, that changed nothing about Spencer being an officer, but that's just how the boys played the game. On top of that, teachers decided to start making complaints about Peaches.

Unlike Jade, who, though rebellious, had good grades and reputations with professors, Peaches had ugly grades, a weak attention span, and a weepish temper when it came to adults. Teachers assumed it was "all that girlishness that made him stupid."

The girls hoped that "girlishness" didn't automatically make them stupid too.

Peaches was no longer allowed to make fashion statements in class. Peaches subjected himself to plain T-shirts and cargoes, which he had to go out and buy before he could return to class. Without the extra "fluff", his underweightedness was obvious to on-lookers.

"It's disturbing" The teachers decided.

Mandatorially, Peaches had to show up to breakfast, lunch, and dinner, he was given a regular date with the gym coach for physical therapy, where Peaches was exposed to the more advanced, who constantly called names, and teased inappropriately. The present sports coaches joined in.

Peaches *hated* it. It made him angry. He could no longer focus in class. He would hit the nature trails instead, going out by his lonesome so he could scream and throw rocks.

He was sent for counseling, despite the fact that he saw a therapist outside of school.

It made him depressed. He lost his energy. He missed meals, the gym, classes, and other assorted dates. Jade no longer heard him practice guitar.

The school sent Peaches to Janice for medication. He was already on the ineffective stuff.

Jade's blood went cold. He'd just watched a perfectly nice boy be masked, wrapped in bandages and thrown in a coffin; in just a few weeks, Peaches went from a shy but sassy, passionate guitarist, to an almost bedridden teenager whose mantra was: "*I just want to kill myself!*"

All of this turmoil didn't even give Peaches a chance to make any friends. This was made clear at lunch break one day.

"Hey, you don't plan on volunteering all weekend do you?" Chastity asked Jade, swallowing down a bite of crunchy, beefy, taco. Jade was solemnly tormenting a canned-fruit salad.

"Yeah, come visit me and my parents," Alexis bribed. "we're having a picnic at the bluffs."

"Sounds fun, but..."

"You could join the weekend volleyball tournament with yours truly." Connie invited Jade to hang with she, Averell, Sherry, G.L., and Hank.

"That all sounds great and everything, but... I can't just let Peaches wander around like this-

All at once, people spoke.

"I mean, I guess he's invited." Connie shrugged.

"Forget about him." Chastity sighed.

"Why do you care about that big baby so much?!" Averell was heatedly abhorred.

"He's a freak!" Sundance frazzled.

"He's worthless!" Sherry pitched in.

"Let him rot, he's a goner." Alexis shook her head. Her tone made Jade recoil.

Shockingly, it was Berry Bury that defended Jade with a big, friendly pound on the back.

"Aw c'mon, y' know Jade's just doin' his Jade thang. No one gits left behind! He can't help it, an' neither can we."

The tension was eased, but Jade was sad to find that even the closest of his friends were being some of the most judgmental. Peaches had done nothing to anybody. And yet many of those around him had resorted to a viciousness he didn't even know they had. What was happening here? Jade was really beginning to think that school was indeed the zombie factory he believed it to be.

Jade was being driven crazy.

He found out that Peaches had not told Spencer about any of this.

"He has a reputation too." Peaches reasoned, groggy with medicine.

"Well what kind of reputation is it, if his only son can't get out of bed in the morning?" Jade was completely driven nuts by the whole situation.

Peaches was falling asleep on Jade's rant. He didn't care. He *couldn't* care.

Jade glanced up to find Peaches out... Jade gave him a light tap to be sure he was totally slumbered.

Silently, Jade slipped Peaches' phone off the nightstand, hoping to get a hold of Spencer Jones, but as soon as the phone lit up, Jade could see that Peaches had put it into Korean mode.

He carefully placed it back on the table...

Jade had a word with Janice. He told her the truth; He believed without a shadow of a doubt, that Peaches medications were doing nothing, and possibly even making him worse. She said there was nothing else she could do.

He laughed at her face.

“You could take some responsibility.”

The school staff neglected Jade. Peaches was just another student – there was no time or need for special attention, and everyone ignored Jade’s pleas for help. The only one to take pity on Jade and his new friend, was Sebastian, who tried to lend a hand that Peaches refused; he didn’t trust any adults he was not familiar with – no matter how nice they were. He believed they only pretended to be kind, only to gaslight him later.

Jade had to mentally, or sometimes even, literally, walk Peaches down the safer paths, for he wasn’t even thinking anymore.

Jade felt so bad for Peaches, that he stayed in touch with him over the Summer, but it was only a ring here and there, an invitation to a party, a movie; they really didn’t get to know each other until the next August, when school drew near again.

Jade sensed that Peaches may not be coming back to Donogan Academy, or to anywhere – *ever*.

Jade was ripped from sleep by some unearthly phenomenon, Chastity swore at Jade as he bolted upright in bed, and leapt to his feet, he dodged Chase and Sundance who were prepared to go out for breakfast. Jade raced by Godwin and a group of boys being scolded in the hall, leaving them astounded that anyone could run so fast; and perhaps Godwin wondered why Jade was still in jeans from the day before, missing his shirt, and taking off down the hall, barefoot.

Jade took to the sidewalks, the parking lot, the school drive through the pinewoods, he ducked under the school gates, ran alongside the highway green, which dangerously hid broken glass and other trash, finally, he recklessly crossed the intersection to get to the bridge – But Peaches wasn’t there anymore.

Jade somehow knew something else was rousing.

He sped across the bridge and took a sharp left into a park, catching sight of Peaches with four kids who, Jade somehow knew, were out skipping school. They’d found Peaches contemplating his self-murder, which they decided to take into their own hands. Paradoxically, this prevented Peaches from jumping, ultimately, saving Peaches from himself, but now left him facing a pack of psychopaths, one of which proudly brandished a knife.

For he and Peaches sake, Jade hoped someone was seeing this.

Jade somehow knew the names of these simultaneous, disturbance-causing-rescuers, he knew where they lived, what school they'd come from, and why they were here. The bullies were surprised when Jade came out of nowhere to collect their target, but were even more startled when the young stranger began dishing out their names, their parents names, and the name of the school they were skipping. He knew about the drugs, the alcohol, and the fact that the leader had just lost his Father.

It was so bizarre and unexplainable, the gang just ran off.

It wasn't long before sirens wailed past, hot on the kids' trail. An ambulance could be heard in the distance.

Jade was huffing and puffing when he turned to Peaches, whom was paralyzed with shock. He was bruised bloody, but nothing more.

"You were going to jump!? *How could you?* How could they do this to you? *Why?!*"

Peaches didn't react to anything Jade said, he just collapsed to his knees as Jade forced him to sit down in the grass. His body barely moved, but his mind flew with the past.

Jade had no idea what Peaches was thinking, but his own head felt ready to explode. He was flooded with grief, but was also furious. Peaches never meant to hurt anyone, yet everyone had to hurt him. No one even tried to ask what the problem was, no one could or would tell him how to get better, so he didn't. In Jade's eyes, it wasn't Peaches' fault for being weak or odd. He was so sad and angry that no one would listen... These feelings were melted with gratitude for hearing a familiar voice.

"Oh my God. How did you know?!" Florian drove up on Malcolm's borrowed motorbike, wide, blue-eyes, blaring past the helmet shades. Jade could hear more police cars arriving.

"Call Janice!" Jade cried.

"I'm already on it!"

School was a catastrophe. With three students missing, rumors tickled the staff's nerves, and the dormitories were sent into lock-down. The suddenness made Truesdale fear it was due to a shooting; he went into an all-out terror that spread like a disease, unbeknownst that he was the catalyst. Truesdale's insatiable panic had all believing there was a shooter on the loose.

Students saw sides of their peers they'd never seen before, making the situation all the more chaotic.

Trapped in their own dorm, Alexis paced the room as Britt trifled nervously with a craft project to distract herself. Illiad fervently texted Addison to see if he knew any more than them, and Averell sat

around biting her nails, listening to Alexis meaninglessly babble about how she should have told Jade this and that.

Illiad went to the window, staring out as she waited for Addison to call her back, but before then, Janice's pearly-white Volkswagen pulled up to the curb, followed by Florian on a "stolen" motorcycle, and three police cars.

"Now what happened here?" Illiad queried, not reading the situation correctly. The other girls came to the window, proceeding to see the officers gather around Janice, Jade and Florian, questioning and taking notes.

Jade was in-over his head on how to explain the telepathic part of the whole ordeal, but he left that detail out as much as he could.

The bawling Peaches was handed off to Spencer who held him so tightly, you'd have thought Peaches could float away.

Maxwell Donogan arrived in his big, black, limo to put order to the teachers and principal. The dormitory lock-down was lifted, and each dorm was lectured on the situation: The gang had been caught, Peaches returned, and the missing students secured.

School was out for the day.

Some students cheered, while others were just exhausted by the stress of it all.

Jade and Florian were finally let go, but before the curious crowds could haggle them, Alexis ran up to hug Jade. She gave Florian a more modest hand-squeeze (which he preferred).

"You guys are heroes!"

Jade smiled weakly, because in what regard, he did not know. This wasn't over yet.

He gave one last look at Peaches, who was now asleep in Spencer's cruiser. Spencer was still discussing things with the other officers and adults, though he told Jade he wanted to personally speak with him later. Jade understood that, but for now, he just wanted to go back to his dorm, wash his face, and go to bed. Florian glanced at Jade; They shared a pat on the back before walking in-step back to the boy's dorm.

Everyone wanted to talk to them, but Alexis, and Jade's dorm mates shooed away the audience.

Florian was content to sit calmly in the living room and get the story straight, but Jade went to bed and slept like a rock.

Around lunchtime, Jade was invited to the staff courtyard by Ms. Fonda to talk over tea and meals. Jade felt a little awkward about having to discuss things in the courtyard, where hating teachers may lurk, but he soon found out it was just Janice and he.

Jade was early and cold in the doorway.

“Come on in.” Janice was still setting the quaint, glass patio table with tea-things and biscuits.

Two walls of the courtyard were painted salmon-pink, while the rest were comprised of intricately laid chalk-white bricks. There was a healthy, potted garden of variously sized and patterned containers, which included herbs, blossoms, and fruiting, red, tomato plants. Jade could smell Janice’s freshly brewed tea, a robust, but newly sweet, aroma.

“I didn’t expect you so soon, but I’m glad you’re here. How are you? How was your Summer?” Janice asked warmly, but added; “You can be honest about it.”

“A little tired, but I’m okay I guess. I’m worried about Peach – I mean Yohan, is he alright?”

“Mr. Jones took him home, he said he’d give you a call tomorrow.”

“That’s fine, I’m sure he and Pea – Yohan have lots to catch up on.”

Janice offered Jade to sit.

“Um… So like, I’ve never been invited to a tea party before.” Jade kept his sense of humor.

“Never? Then allow me to have the first impression.” She chuckled, stirring the hot drinks before handing Jade a tea cup of the beautiful orchid liquid. He sipped and smiled.

“Oishii!”

It was a foreign word Peaches had taught him. Janice laughed, giving Jade a moment to eat and drink before getting onto more serious subjects.

“Now then, let me begin with-” She suddenly sighed with the most painful of an expression. “I owe you an apology, Jade.”

Jade coughed on his sandwich. This wasn’t at all what he was expecting.

“You have changed the standards for Donogan Academy, and we have not only *not* thanked you for it, but we’ve done nothing to aid you, support you, nor acknowledge your persistence and responsibility. Responsibility, *that was never yours.*”

Jade stopped eating. He was quiet, pensive…

“When you were admitted last year, you were boarded with Chastity Patricks, whom we’ve struggled with for years; Terrible grades, grades behind, and with the reputation of a bully we’ve had to suspend numerously. Ever since you came, he hasn’t pulled a punch since.”

“I had no idea.”

“I didn’t think so. Did you know that Blaze Sigmonton used to skip classes and break dorm rules almost every day before you found her that dog?”

“No.”

“You visit the library only to visit Mr. Masters who has suffered crushing depression for three years, never leaving the library since – until now. Addison says they now go to the theater, to lunch, and is taking acting, and tap-dance classes. Ambrose Godwin... Is *flourished...*” She didn’t even bother to finish explaining him.

“You uplifted the football team, befriended our dear Heather, I hear you spoke to Britt Bronwyn – Miserable she’s been! And now she comes to me wanting to help me open my new tea shop down town; and it had something to do with you, she tells me-”

“Congratulations on the store.” Jade interjected. Janice smiled.

“On top of all that, you’ve helped to restore stolen items, quelled fights, and added much value to Donogan Academy. And now *this!*” She implied the day, putting her teacup down with a clatter. “You were left on your own to deal with Yohan Jones, and ultimately saved the day. However, it was *never* your responsibility... Maxwell Donogan will be changing a few things around here because of you. I truly am sorry for all the trouble we’ve put you through... And I must tell you that I am impressed and awed to see what an exceptional young man you are, Jade.”

Jade felt seen for the first time in his life.

“Thank you.”

Shortly after, Sebastian flew into the courtyard, diving for Jade’s hands. He shook them wildly.

“My dear boy! You’ve inspired me! I shall go back to studying and get another psychology degree! I’m going to write all of the books I ever wanted to write, and I will go to Africa this Summer!”

Jade beamed.

Jade rode his bike out to officer Jone’s neighborhood. He had recently picked up a wilderness survival manual at a book sale, and learned to navigate by map and compass, so he usually vied to pedal, than take the crowded and polluting bus.

He turned his red bicycle into the entrance of the neighborhood, smelling strong, and sweet of pine.

He wheeled into the driveway of a nice, white, gray-roofed house with a big lawn, picket fence, and quaffed holly bushes. There was a tall tangerine tree growing by the side of the house, and a pool in the gated backyard. A small, messy garden of melon vines sat in the corner. Spencer had a vivid-blue pick-

up, aside from the cruiser parked in the front of the garage - a bird was attacking itself in the rear view mirrors of the truck.

Jade shooed the avian as he went up the walk to knock on the door, which caused not one, but three dogs, to start barking. Jade broke a grin as he could hear Spencer repeat: "Sit! Sit... I said *sit*."

He opened the door, holding the lapdog, Pepe; a sock-footed, blue merle, Australian Shepard-pom mix. The deep-dished barker was Spencer's K-9, a lightly dusted German Shepard called Rayz, whom was sitting beside Spencer with exquisite manners. The excited Dalmatian in a rainbow collar, wagged his tail, crying happily, wanting to know what Jade brought him.

"Good morning Mr. Jewel, please excuse these mutts."

"No problem. Good morning." Jade came in. The German Shepard dog politely licked Jade's hand, while Hudson, the Dalmatian, smothered Jade and hounded him into the living room. Pepe was released and so was his yapping. Spencer sent the dogs into the backyard.

"Thanks for coming, I'm glad you could make it. Hungry? There's still eggs and bacon." Spencer offered as they came into the front room. Jade was surprised to see the house had an upstairs – it didn't at all look like it from the outside, but there Peaches was, stepping his way down the white-carpeted, oak stairway. He was back to his old, frilly self, and barefoot. His blond hair was a mess as though he'd just awoke. His battle-scars were patched with bandages.

"Buddy, look who's here." Spencer called him down. Peaches paused on the stairway. He hesitated.

"Hey Peaches!" Jade greeted, realizing he just let Yohan's funny nickname slip.

"Peaches, huh?" Spencer said, but didn't seem bothered. Peaches tiptoed down, staring wide, at Jade. Jade reached out, tenderly. Peaches froze with shyness, but Spencer prompted him out.

"There was something you wanted to tell Jade, go on and tell him."

Peaches looked at the ground, came forward, mumbled, changed his mind, and shuffled again until he finally just hugged Jade. He retreated back to Spencer, who put a palm on his head, but sighed disappointedly.

"He wanted to say thank you."

"Don't worry, I can tell." Jade smiled.

Peaches was quiet the rest of the time, falling asleep on the couch as Spencer spoke to Jade. Spencer began with very emotional words of appreciation to Jade, solemnly admitting that yesterday's trip out to Anklyn Bridge was not Peaches' first. In fact, Peaches had failed to commit suicide several times. Peaches had come from parents that had killed themselves through drinking.

The knowledge overwhelmed Jade. He could feel some kind of hurt deep in his core... It floored him to look at Peaches now, asleep on the couch next to his Dad, and think that he may have never even gotten a chance to meet Peaches. Jade was abruptly frustrated.

"Well then why did you send him away?" Jade snapped.

"To school?" Spencer understood right away. "Maxwell Donogan had known Yohan's blood parents, and I'd already been doing night shift at the academy for years. Seemed right at the time. I'd been encouraging Yohan to get out a little more, make some friends, y' know? He'd gotten a little proud about it, tried way too hard to impress me; see, his dream is to go meet his pen pals in Japan and have a rock band," Spencer shook his head. "he's really into that stuff. Anyway, I guess he thought if I could see him doing well living on his own, I'd let him start traveling by himself."

"No way, bad move!" Jade swallowed hard. "You've gotta have grit to survive that place."

"Yeah... I get that... But Yohan has to work for it too, you understand that? He can't expect people to just accommodate him, he has to let people know what he needs. Believe me, I've been through it. If he don't talk, he don't get. He has to learn to trust again." There was a sparkle in the officer's eye, as if he knew that would eventually be the case.

Jade was impressed by Spencer's tolerance for Peaches. He did not take Peaches' behavior personally, and remained a solid man, understanding that although Peaches was sensitive due to his past, both Peaches himself, and the people in his environment, equally needed to work out their stuff.

Peaches woke suddenly, slipping on his long night pants as he dove for the stairs. Spencer called after.

"Please no running on the stairs."

"I've got the ending for Super Angel!" Peaches shouted back. He was talking about a song.

Spencer gestured for Jade to follow as he went to the kitchen to fix some refreshments.

Jade mindfully climbed the stairs to a hall of several doors, everything was white, oak, and heavily cushioned with carpet. He automatically knew which room was Peaches', as guitar music seeped into the hallway. Jade stayed in the door frame to watch Peaches play, scribble notes, play some more, scribble more notes... He noticed the wild looking room in the background.

The walls were violet, the curtains, lacy and egg-white, as if the room was once intended for a baby, but the walls were now scrappily decorated in Peaches' artwork, anime posters, J-rock merchandise, and Japanese and Korean magazine clippings. Family photos were displayed on the dresser, which was gouged, and over-painted. There was a multi-colored lamp with dot-eyes, there was a pillow on the bed with dot-eyes, and the electric-yellow bean bag on the floor had dot-eyes. He had metallic-purple recording equipment beside a glossy, black and flame-wood acoustic guitar, while a white electric guitar

with an Asian tattoo, chilled on a wall mount. Peaches was quietly making notes when Jade announced his presence.

“So what’s with the whole dot-eyed thing, anyway?”

Peaches looked up in surprise, grinning in embarrassment. That was all he had to input about that.

Jade sat back in the bean bag as Peaches finished his guitar solo, but Spencer had let the dogs back in, and they came racing upstairs; Hudson attacked Jade’s face with sloppy dog kisses, Pepe attacked Peaches bare toes, and Rayz lay down at the foot of Peaches’ bed, watching the crazies on.

The boys played with the dogs, talked about Peaches’ music, and also his foreign friends, to which Peaches shared with Jade some whacky snacks and candies they liked to send to him.

Spencer who brought up some juice, fruit, and cheese, laughed when he saw the boys sampling the strange treats.

“Oh no, not those again.” He said, implying he’d tried the pizza-flavored taffies.

To Jade’s surprise, Spencer sat right on the floor, openly joining the conversation.

Although he was a hardcore male due to his work, he did not injure Peaches decision to be “artistic”. Maybe he teased Peaches for the black nail polish, and wished the dot-eyed creatures to hell, drew lines at some of Peaches desires to cosmetically experiment, and so forth, but Jade could tell the two balanced one another out, as Peaches reminded Spencer that if he were to find a date, he’d have to give up watching so much football, and learn to appreciate going to museums, parks, and movies – not just the shooting range.

Otherwise still, Spencer turned out to be a pretty interesting man, having grown up with seven other siblings. He himself, had been in a band once, as a drummer (which he now used to help Peaches complete his music), he’d briefly worked as a pit stop mechanic for car racing, entered boxing competitions as a teenager, and was associates with police dog trainers. He was very much an outdoors man, but was also in the middle of starting a business. The softest hobby he had, was writing educational children’s books for Peaches to illustrate. But his newest thing was public speaking.

“That freaks me out!” Peaches rolled over on the bed. Spencer laughed.

“Well you’re gonna have to if you want to sing and play on stage.”

“I know! I know!”

Jade further tickled Peaches by reminding him that he still owed him a concert. Peaches promised he’d do it soon, but the day was growing old, and Jade had to return to school on time for curfew.

“So when and where will I be seeing you?” Jade asked Peaches now that things were different. Spencer explained that Peaches would be staying home for quite some time, but he may return to Donogan Academy as a regular student, not a resident.

“Hope to see you before then.” Jade hugged Peaches. He shook hands with officer Jones, and they all bid farewell at the door. Jade mounted his bicycle and sped off down the street, feeling happy, rested, and relieved. It appeared Spencer and Peaches were already back to their old selves.

Before Jade made it to campus, it began to rain – not that he minded, but the ally cats did; The usual bunch scattered, ducking under dumpsters, porches, and into the open garage of a mechanic shop. On the wetted, wore, sidewalk, Jade maneuvered around what he thought was a piece of trash, but soon discovered it was a hunkered-down kitten, black as night, thin as could be, paralyzed by the sudden weather, and gazing up at Jade with green eyes – the same hue as Peaches’.

“Why do you always do this to me?” Jade muttered to the Universe. He lightly touched the tiny creature... It was too weak to care. Jade folded it into his jacket to shelter it from the cold drops of rain – which suddenly pelted down with a burning edge.

It was hailing.

Jade walked his bike into the cluttered, greasy, garage of the mechanic shop, several creaky, old cars on jacks took up most of the space, but there was a tool bench laden with rusty machine parts, obtrusively large metal objects rested against the wall, or hung. Squeezed in the tight corner, was a children’s table piled with an open bag of white bread, a couple of bruised apples, and a few tin cans that no longer had labels. Loud rock music blasted from a vintage boombox...

Jade jumped a bit as a young man rolled out from beneath a car, lying on a scratched-up skateboard. His otherwise, lightly tanned face, was blotched with black, and oil had dripped into his curly, umber hair. Deep blue eyes peered from the filth, completely clear, clean, and sparkling.

“Hi you, what’d you need, kid?”

“Can I wait the storm out, here?”

“Would y’ look at that... Absolutely.” He sat up, having not even seen the weather yet. He rubbed his black hands on a black-stained rag before lowering the music’s volume.

“Um... Are any of the cats around here, yours?”

“Cats? They’re everywhere. Won’t claim to keep no one in particular. Have a seat, help yourself to a bite, actually, there’s Coke in the fridge, patata salad y’ want some.”

Jade was moved. This young man clearly didn’t have much, but he was rather generous.

“Can I put my bike here?”

“Drop it wherever, doesn’t make a difference, just don’t move nothing else. Despite what you see, I know where everything is.” The mechanic smirked at his organized disaster. Jade smiled too.

“What’s your name? I’m Jade Jewel, I currently live at Donogan Academy.”

The mechanic was impressed. He only knew Donogan Academy to be a wealthy, education-based part of town; a huge campus with rich history. He’d always wanted to attend the robotics lab.

“Well isn’t that something. Call me Rob. Tell me Jade-Jewel, what brings you all the way out here, then?”

“I was visiting friends in Pine Grove...”

Suddenly faced with the truth of the matter, Jade was broke wide-open. All the while, smiling, laughing, and crying, he was able to explain to Rob, Peaches’ near death experience.

Rob could have taken Jade as crazy, but the mechanic understood he was just tickled by relief.

Rob then noticed the kitten in Jade’s lap... He nodded to the distance with a wise look about his young, dirty, face; He could only have been in his late teens, or early twenties.

“You just wanna save every soul you come across, eh?”

Jade blinked – There was an instant connection in that statement. Rob caught his glow.

“But I just don’t think we can... People guise their hell fires as works of thought and actions, it’s just the peril of being 3-D. Nothing we can do to stop their choices. We can seek to inspire, but in the end, we change no one but ourselves, understand it, jewel kid, it took me a good, long, while to get that, and I ain’t even finished yet.”

Jade could see into Rob’s sheer eyes; as if he could read Rob’s story before he’d even opened the book for Jade. Rob had seen violence. He’d been homeless – maybe still was. He’d lost friends. He was angry at the world, but he also grieved the way people had turned themselves into things they were not... And yet, there was still kindness in his heart. He still believed he could do good after perhaps doing a lot of wrong in his short, young, life. In fact, Jade had a sneaking suspicion Rob could have easily ended up just like the kids who had intended to attack Peaches.

But he wasn’t.

The two talked for what felt like hours.

Sunset shone by the time the clouds dispersed. Jade left, hoping he’d see Rob again some day.

Back at the Academy, Jade chained his bike and entered the dorm lobby... Things had been warily quiet since Peaches’ incident. There were no teachers to be seen, for they were all attending important

meetings being held by Maxwell in the central building. Students were tucked into their rooms, and if not, filled the stagnant dark of the living room with gossip about the episode.

The fragile kitten was sound asleep in Jade's red jacket when he turned into the dorm room to find the boys crowding Sundance, whispering as if someone could actually hear them through the walls.

Jade dropped his backpack on the floor as his mouth also dropped – Sundance had a huge cotton eye patch behind his glasses, on his sad, mad, face. There was an ice pack in his fist.

“Jade, if you really are magic, then please – PLEASE-” He begged. “Make Truesdale disappear forever!”

Chapter 8

A Picnic With Britt

Jade wasn't really sure how to do that – but he was momentarily spared the job, for Truesdale was finally expelled. To the boy's utmost bewilderment, Truesdale lashed back – He asked for whatever job was open to the public at Donogan Academy. The school refused him. Truesdale got hostile. He accused the Academy of being an unequal opportunity employer, saying they were cruel to refuse a struggling, blind man. They gave in, but the only available line of work was a janitorial position.

He took it. The boys didn't understand, but Sundance was sure he had revenge in his heart...

In the meantime, Jade had better things on the horizon. The school staff meetings were finally closing on the current situations. Teachers once again flooded the halls, swarming Jade with excitement. He was hearing apologies from all around.

“Mr. Donogan told us all off good, we need to make some changes around here, just like you've been suggesting all along.” Admitted a staff member.

“We're going to start an anti-bullying program!” Said another.

“Officer Spencer Jones was interested in speaking to the student body about bullying and mental health awareness.”

“We would like you to speak on stage with him next Monday.”

“Jade Jewel, you are not only a hero, but a leader.”

Jade was flattered, but he also sensed their cringing facade. They hated his guts for making them look bad in front of Mr. Donogan.

Hoping to lift Rob's spirit, Jade went back to the fix-it shop to invite Rob to the talk. He was happy to oblige, but Jade never did end up seeing him in the audience that day, because the doormen didn't like the appearance of the rugged tramp.

When Spencer had finished his section of the program, he then introduced and welcomed, Jade on stage. Jade had butterflies, but his mind was still. He walked on stage with hands in his pockets, and Minty, his new kitten, riding on his shoulder (He'd just discussed keeping the stray with the staff; They said it was the least they could do for him). Everybody laughed at his fuzzy parrot, including Spencer, but it made Jade feel all the more confident.

“Good morning, ladies and gentleman...”

It all happened so fast... Not just the speech that day, but Jade's transformation. One moment Jade was just an ordinary teenager trying to survive high school, the next, he was an uplifting speaker giving talks about his adventures like he was born on stage. He had the supernatural ability to get students to listen; He entertained, he could make people cry, but best of all, he elevated them – sometimes inspiring them to make changes. The bullied felt seen, and the weak, felt protected.

Maxwell Donogan was so impressed, he got Jade presentation times at other schools, libraries, and even an interview with the local paper.

Donogan Academy was greatly impacted. Many of the bullies cooled off as it became embarrassing to harass the “losers” who increasingly showed the secret weapons that they'd been hiding up their sleeves. Talents, confidence, and better grades arose.

Since Spencer spoke on stage with Jade in the beginning, Peaches was always in the audience, being touched by Jade's insights as well. During this time, Peaches and Jade became best friends.

Jade thought all would be well for Peaches from here on, but he soon realized the fight for Peaches' happiness was not quite over...

Jade found this out when Peaches' weight dangerously stooped. The part that Jade didn't understand, was that Peaches barely noticed. All he knew, was that he was sick, and he was tired of people always telling him what to eat.

“Did you ever notice how nothing is good for you?” Peaches commented one day; It seemed like he was always reminiscing over some traditional Asian dish or another, but disliked everything in front of him. As soon as Jade heard this, he saw that he too, had neglected his health since coming to school.

He decided to do some research...

Jade scrolled the web.

Sugar was bad for you. Salt was bad for you. Gluten and grains were bad for you. Meat was bad for you. Fruit contained too much sugar. Greens contained too many oxalates. Produce in general, had many toxins, and dairy was filled with anti-biotics. Eating meat was cruel, but people claimed vegetarianism would kill you. “Your diet should consist of a balance of carbs, fats, and protein,” but of course, carbs, fat, and protein, was also, bad for you.

Jade wanted to bang his head on the wall. He sought the biology geeks.

Britt and Hank, who passionately aided Jade in finding sound information, unfortunately, argued amongst themselves. Asking Janice for advice only contradicted things further. It was no wonder why Peaches had given up. Jade grew impatient.

“Why not just find a sunny spot, bury your feet in the ground and water your head?” Jade muttered exasperatedly.

“Oh, but of course the Sun is also bad for you.” Hank reminded, flashing bored amber eyes, and smoothing his short, brown hair. It was now an inside joke, but nobody laughed.

In the end, the kids could only agree on one thing; Chemicals, pesticides, and preservatives were unnecessary. The conclusion put a twinkle into Jade’s eye.

“Hey, you want to be part of my next big idea?”

“I think I’m going to want to.” Britt smirked. Hank did the same.

And so the petition for health food in the cafeteria, began. However, it was difficult to get students to sign in the beginning, since most of what the threesome were trying to bring to the table, their peers had never even heard of.

“We’re trying to promote additive-free food. No BPA, no growth hormones, and non-GMO.”

“What’s GMO?” G.L. asked Hank. Hank shook him by the shoulders.

“It’s when you’re eating a *clone*!”

G.L. looked perfectly alarmed, and even a little green. He signed at once.

When Jade gave his anti-bullying talks, he tried to bring attention to the petition as well. Many were happy to sign in Jade’s honor. It was really only a matter of weeks that the trio gained an impressive number of names, the petition was sent in, and approved.

It was not as perfect as Britt dreamed it could be, but it was a start. They were pleased with what they had done, and it brought health to the forefront of people’s attention.

Since everyone had food on the brain, Peaches was able to get with the program. Jade was happy to see Peaches gain weight; and Chase, lose some. Which he was feeling pretty darn good about.

To celebrate their successful petition, Hank, Britt, and Jade met up at the park one day for a picnic. Peaches, Florian, and Sundance tagged along, and though they didn’t make themselves evident, Illiad, Alexis, and Addison sat not far, hiding out in the benched pagodas.

Illiad was tenacious about making Britt see that Jade was way cooler than Truesdale. She had found every excuse why Truesdale wasn't good for her, but Britt still had not given up on the foul man.

"He's too old for you, too busy, too awful, and too *evil*. Don't you think those are some pretty good reasons?"

Britt never listened, but Illiad had a plan.

"Don't you think Jade is just so nice and funny, and awesome, and *not evil*?" Illiad practiced saying with a determined smile. The Rose siblings stared.

"You might want to work on those adjectives..." Addison said as he tuned his ukulele.

On the other side of the Oak-rich park, Britt was spreading a white and red checkered picnic blanket, making the boys laugh.

"How classic." Hank said, tugging the wrinkles out, before placing Britt's favorite, old, flip-top picnic basket on the surface. Florian had already made fun of Britt's old-school bicycle. It made them wonder what she packed for lunch.

Jade himself, had brought a couple of dishes he'd tweaked into healthier versions from Heather's recipe book. Hank brought an all-natural, honey-sweetened citrus tea, Peaches, a fresh watermelon, and Florian, somewhere, somehow, packed each of his friends a steaming, lobster thermidor. Sundance still didn't quite get the whole health food thing, so he was simply in charge of bringing the plates, utensils and napkins.

When Hank opened the picnic basket, he pulled out a mysterious-looking, vibrant, bluish-turquoise-purple pie. He grimaced.

"Er... What's this?"

"Cabbage pie. Red cabbage, it turns blue when it's cooked."

"Delicious." Hank lied. He reached for the foil-covered plate and peeked under. "And this?"

"Sweet potato buns."

"Sounds harmless enough... And what's in here?" Hank lifted the last container.

"I call them... Health cookies."

"Can't wait." Hank fibbed.

Everybody had fun trying each thing one at a time. While Peaches' watermelon wasn't a recipe, Britt had to compliment its' sensational flavor.

"Dad and I grew it from seeds I got from friends in Japan. They do their melons like treats there."

Everyone loved Florian's seafood. Hank's tea was refreshing, and Jade's home-made, gluten-free pizza was a hit. The cabbage pie was actually pretty good. Sundance particularly enjoyed Britt's sweet potato biscuits, and then it was time for dessert...

Everybody bit into Britt's cookies at once... For a moment they were quiet, but then burst out laughing, including Britt.

There was no need to say anything about how they tasted.

"*What* did you put in these!?" Sundance exploded.

"Healthy stuff, what'd you expect!?"

"Whatever it is, it's not dessert!" Hank jested. Florian couldn't contain his mockery, either.

"Try the new, delicious, and nutritious, Bronwyn Health *Bricks*, today!" He said in a commercial-worthy tone. Britt was both embarrassed and tickled.

Once everybody was full, the party wandered the park, Hank and Florian stood on the lakefront, trading recipes, while Illiad finally came over to test her prose on Britt. Since it was about Truesdale, Sundance stayed to input his own opinions, and Jade and Peaches goofed around on the park's tire swing.

Although he was having fun, Peaches grew tired and had to sit in the shade. He was busy talking to Hank and Florian under the acorn trees when Alexis came up the walk to confront Jade. She'd grown jealous of hearing Illiad blabber about how Jade and Britt were going to be together.

"Hey Lexi!" Jade greeted in high-spirits. She glumly blinked back.

"What's wrong?"

"Not much, I guess..."

"Wanna walk?" Jade suggested, thinking there was a more private matter at hand. She took a step to answer.

They went to the opposite side of the lake view, where ducks paddled in the water, and dragonflies spun in the sunset's glow. Alexis was gazing into the water's ripples, which reflected the tangerine sky. Her hazel eyes were wet.

"Where have you been, Jade?"

"What do you mean? I've been trying to help Peach, petitioning, speaking, hey, I got a job at *Roxy's Pizza parlor* last Tuesday-"

"Exactly." Alexis snapped, a hint of anger in her face.

"Exactly? What's that supposed to mean?"

“I get it, you saved Peaches – Yohan, whatever his name is – but you don’t have to babysit him for the rest of your days! That’s Mr. Jones’s job! You have your own life to live, I mean, I know you want to help others, but it’d be nice if you just, y’ know... Had more time for friends... Can’t you be just a little normal? You’re turning into a narcissist the way you suck up the whole hero thing. Can’t you just be a little bad? You make us look lazy and stupid.”

“You mean be normal... For you?” Jade narrowed his brows at the unfounded incriminations. Alexis sank with humiliation. Jade gave a softer glance.

“You know, this isn’t all fun and games. I work hard. I’ve given so many things up already. If you wanted to hang out sometime, you could have just said so. But I’m not compromising myself just to fit in – oh, and by the way, being “normal” is harming people.”

“I know that...” Alexis wilted at his words – words that were difficult to digest.

“Can you respect that?”

“I suppose...”

“Good. Now let’s go rescue Britt from her sister now, shall we?”

Alexis submitted to a little smile. She was afraid she’d insulted Jade, but she knew that in his darkest depths, he was an impenetrable soul... She yearned to have that. She craved to be like him. She lived between awe and envy, wishing that he was hers’ so that the feeling of “something more” than the unfair world, wouldn’t leave her... That night, she prayed that Jade would notice something beautiful within her. Maybe he’d care more for a girl like her when he was older. Maybe he’d grow out of this whole “saving the world” thing, and finally face reality, and realize one day, that he’d have to get a real job, get married, and have a family, and have a normal life, just like everybody else...

It could still happen. She thought.

“Hey,” Jade mentioned to the new cafeteria lady, Ms. Fahrani. “I had an idea, since the school had to re-source its ingredients, maybe we can save some hassle by growing some of the food on site. What do you think of a community garden?”

The deeply tanned, chestnut-haired woman laid her almond eyes on the boy. She had a smooth, sturdy voice that was clear and concise; a voice she had gotten from her Blackfoot Grandparents. She was always very present.

“Boy, you ask for too much.”

“We have flower gardens, why not vegetable gardens? Why not a couple apple trees?”

“Apples don’t do well here. What you want, are Satsumas, Plums, and pecans. I love crab apples myself, and blackberries are native.”

“How do you know all that?” Jade questioned with a sparkle.

“I’m a hard-core gardener. I will talk to the board. No promises, honey.”

“I’ll start looking for volunteers!”

“I’m sure you will.”

It was Fall, but before Halloween could take hold of people’s attentions, Sebastian’s class rejoiced to hear of a dazzling field trip they’d be taking to the coast for environmental studies and a marine life project. They’d be camping at the Nature Preserve for one whole week; In the south. It would be like Summer vacation in autumn, and all they’d owe back was a report and a little science project.

Jade was glad to hear that Peaches decided to go. It was another chance to show Spencer he could be brave, but this time, Jade knew, he’d succeed.

As Jade packed for camp, he happened upon his mysterious, little golden friend again – the golden box he’d found by the big rock. He tried to wedge a pen knife between the box and its’ lid, but he realized the overlapping lip, the crease where the box snapped closed, would have to be slightly lifted while the knife did the prying in order to get it open. Since he didn’t have four arms, and no one else was around, he gave up, and left it in the bottom of the dresser. Minty came springing out of the drawer, further ending the battle with the golden box. Jade chuckled and threw a catnip mouse over his shoulder, reminding himself that he also needed to pack Minty’s things because she’d be staying with Heather while he was gone. There was no moment to even recall the big rock and its’ ghostly mourner whom awaited to be rescued by Stan A. Solve.

“You want to do *what*!” Sundance garbled, causing himself to squirt the bottle of sunblock in his hands all over the rest of the crew.

Chastity cried-out in irksome. Alexis dodged the spray by holding up a pamphlet in front of her face. Everything smelled like coconuts and bananas.

Jade sighed with a face full of cream, for the outburst was directed at him.

“What’s so bad about that?” Jade said as Alexis reached over to wipe the sunscreen off his nose. “When we get back, I want to start doing talks for teachers. They really need to hear this stuff too.”

“I totally agree, a thousand percent, up to the Moon and back.” Florian fanned himself with a booklet. You could see a smirk behind his sunglasses.

“Jade,” Sundance ignored Florian. “you seriously believe a buncha tired adults want a teenager telling them what to do? Not a chance! Do you know what my Dad said the other day?”

As the students boarded the bus, Jade was too distracted to listen to Sundance complain. Besides, he was given the job of looking out for Peaches, which Spencer was counting on him for.

Jade was glad to see Sebastian was the chaperon for their bus; he certainly made it an interesting ride for those not occupied by their phones and video games. So while Sebastian wasn’t singing opera about saving an endangered species of crustacean, Jade was babbling to his friends about his next speeches and how he wanted to expand into other topics. Chase made his hand talk as Jade went on, poking fun at Jade’s obsession.

“Hey, we’re all very impressed Jade, but really, don’t you ever just feel like chillin’?”

“Yeah,” Alexis barged into the conversation. “you’re volunteering all your free time, and you still expect to help kittens down from trees. Maybe you should do something for yourself once in awhile.”

“Of course I do stuff for myself!” Jade insisted with a smile. “I *keep* the kittens!”

Blaze snickered as she put in her earbuds.

Peaches head softly dropped to Jade’s shoulder, sound asleep, while his other shoulder was tapped by Florian. Jade twisted to see Florian’s expression – he was about to burst.

“Guess who lives on the coast, next door to the preserve?!”

“Who?”

“Me!” He whispered. “Hope you brought your rich-cat whiskers and gold tennis shoes!”

Jade grinned.

“I didn’t even bring nice clothes!”

It was a grueling couple of hours on the road before seeing the right signs. The bus roared into the palm tree-fringed entrance, leaving students to bubble excitedly as the chaperons signed in. There were tropical plants and blooms everywhere you looked, varying in sizes, shapes, and even smells. A flock of gulls glittered overhead.

“This is gonna be awesome!” Florian cheered.

The students were given a quick tour, safety lecture, and then shown the campsite where they were instructed to pitch tents. It took a lot longer than the chaperons thought it would, so it was lunchtime

when they officially finished. The group ate under a huge pavilion attached to an outdoor amphitheater. The indoor area consisted of a large lobby, a gift shop, a classroom, and the restrooms. Inside the classroom was an extravagant collection of taxidermed specimens and live fish tanks of native species. The group didn't get to tour it for long, but they would be back tomorrow for the project overview.

That night, the counselors gave a mini demonstration on lighting a fire by flint and steel. Jade was literally drawn like a moth to the flame.

"Building a fire is a piece of cake," Said counselor James. "usually, birthday cake."

It was Malcolm who erupted with laughter – apparently, he had a story to relate.

While Addison rocked out on his ukulele, Berry, Blaze, and the football boys roasted hot dogs. Alexis and her girls chatted, while Britt read and pestered Sebastian about native wildflowers. There were plenty of students on their phones, mesmerized by games and social media, including Chastity, Chase, Averell, Milly, and many more. G.L., was of course, writing, and Jade and Florian were plotting on how to escape over to Florian's place. Peaches texted Spencer about how things were going, but he was quickly back outside, gazing at stars, away from everybody else...

Jade looked up at the stars, too. He always wondered why they appeared slightly haunting to him... Like there was something missing in his understanding of the sky...

It was soon lights out, but the whispering, yabbering, noises and cellphone glows long remained.

Jade woke to the rising Sun, a fresh breeze, and the distant whirl of rolling waves. Florian was already gone from the tent, but Peaches lie beside Jade, twitching in dreaming. He nudged him to come to, just on time to hear the chaperons rousing the campsite with a roll call.

"I should have brought my trumpet." Jade heard Sebastian mutter. Jade unzipped the blinds to the caressing light of daybreak, everything was wet and dew-dropped, including the weedy flowers in the sand. Even butterflies were trying to warm up in the morning's illumination, despite the cool winds. The Sun was smudged out by an elegant mist that made everything blossom in a tasty strawberry light. He breathed it all in...

Chapter 9

Florian's Swag

The students breakfasted at the pavilion. They then set out on their first expedition with maps, binoculars, and other useful instruments. The class headed out on rented bikes down one of the park's many birding trails. The teachers pointed out plants, animals, birds, and environmental features along the way. Some students listened, some just played; wheeling around on ridiculously sized and colored bicycles. Jade had to admit, this parade looked very much like a circus act.

Sundance rode up on a shiny, crimson, Chinese tricycle, brandishing a camera for all to see.

"My Uncle let me borrow this, it's super high-tech, so hopefully, I will finally get to capture Sasquatch on film. Do you believe in Bigfoot, Jade?"

"Sure, I've seen worse."

"Oh, he's seen worse." Sundance's lids dropped at Chastity who cruised by on an orange mountain bike. He chortled.

Jade slowed down as Peaches appeared to be falling behind, but he was really just lost in thought.

With his friends in the dust, Sundance pedaled faster through the grassland bike trail, singing the 60s Spider man theme song as he passed the other bikers. Blaze and Sherry got competitive, speeding ahead, which turned the whole row of cyclists into racers. Berry did a wheelie on his tiny, little, blue bicycle.

The chaperon in the back of the line called them all off it with the blow of a whistle. They all sighed in irritation, but laughed.

Florian sidled Jade.

"Lunchtime, how 'bout it? I talked to Sebastian, he said it'd be okay to go."

"Your place? Awesome! Is-"

"Peaches invited? Of course, you can't let Mr. Jones down."

"Thanks. But y' know, the others aren't going to think too highly of this-"

"For God's sake, they can think what they want about my supposed gold-brick fortress."

The ride continued on into a salty pine forest, where below the needle canopy, grew saw palmettos and ferns. Mocking birds, Grackles, and Mourning Doves were abundant, while other creatures were only seen for a fleeting moment – such as the huge Bald Eagle, a wandering Cormorant, and a shy marsh rabbit. The group, at last, arrived to their destination: A birding board walk over-looking the brackish

swamp. There were already herons, egrets, and ducks awaiting them, but it was the alligators that got everybody's attention.

Peaches stayed on the thickly bushed corner of the walk, where the trail made contact with the shore. The water was dark and calm as he gazed out to the scenery, alone. But Jade kept a close eye on him, watching vigilantly as he bent down to look closer at something near the water. Jade thought nothing of it, but whatever it was, Peaches was so enthralled, that he never made it up to the board walk.

The others took a break for water and snacks. Students shot photos. The teachers spoke.

One last gander towards the lake, and the group was back on the move, mounting their bicycles again.

"Time to go." Jade called Peaches. Peaches did nothing in response. Addison took a more enthusiastic approach.

"Yo, Jones! We're moving out!"

Addison went to investigate the oddly inert Peaches, he was suddenly cussing like Alexis had never heard him before. His sister's head jerked up, along with the other counselor's. No one could see what was the matter, but Addison was now instructing Peaches to back away slowly... He did nothing.

Addison carefully stepped in and grabbed the frozen boy. The bystanders could now hear the warning jangling of a confronted rattlesnake...

Addison triumphantly pulled Peaches out of harm's way, and people found themselves applauding. Peaches remained dumbfounded until a frustrated counselor doused him with a sudden slap of cold, bottled water. He was lectured on safety precautions, yet again.

All went on their way, but Peaches said nothing, not even to Addison. He was already consumed by past times he'd gotten in trouble for freezing up.

Jade and Florian quietly strolled behind Peaches.

"He'll cheer up," Florian whispered. "I promise, you guys are gonna have a good time at my place."

At noon the three boys walked the beach side into Florian's backyard, where a sturdy pier with four jet skis doubled over as a boating shed. Up the hill was a big white house with big windows, and a balcony on every floor, at every door. There was a private tennis court on the side of the house.

Next to the backdoor was a lovely concrete pond where a large, striped frog sat at the water's peak, eyeing the air from a maze of mauve lily pads. Jade peered in.

"No koi, man, the cheetah eats them all." Florian unlocked the door.

"Cheetah?!"

“Shh!” Florian hushed almost too happily. The boys crept into the marble-tiled kitchen that over-saw the backyard. A bar counter margined the cookery from the tall-ceilinged living room, which was adorned with bleach-white rugs, bleached leather couches, a gigantic T.V., and marble sculptures. Jade recognized the chirping of a whole flock of whistling cockatiels coming from somewhere within the mansion. As the boys were about to turn a corner, Florian put a finger to his lips at the sound of Oxford shoes coming down the hallway.

“BOO!” He cried at the butler.

“Whoaa!” The old man cried back, dropping a silver platter that luckily didn’t have anything on it. “Sir!” He scolded. Florian laughed his head off.

This was an age-old game between he and the lifelong house keepers. Florian introduced Jade and Peaches, then proceeded with the tour. Jade was still laughing long after.

Florian’s home was so amazing, Peaches asked if he could take pictures.

On the second story, Florian peeked into a sunny conservatory filled with exotic plants and bookshelves. Inside, a young maid was dusting as she talked on the phone. Florian bounced into the room.

“BOO!”

The girl’s narrative was clipped by a shriek. She spun around to Florian’s funny pose.

“Sir, you’re back?!”

“That was Aleigh, right?” Florian confirmed the friend on the other end of the line, with a mischievous grin.

The maid fumbled to get the phone back to her mouth to explain the foolishness that just occurred. Florian only laughed some more.

“Good to see ya, Emma.” He added before parading on. Jade was holding his stomach with hysteria.

On the third floor, Florian paused in front of his older cousin’s office, where a ticking wall clock was as evident as the sound of slowly, leafed-through papers.

“BOO!” Florian resounded.

The long-haired man stared over half-moon spectacles.

There was a rainbow-filled, Brazilian, Quartz gazing ball on his fastidiously organized desk. Mr. Silver smirked, glistening almost as brightly as the crystals, bones, and beads that decorated his serene work space.

“I could hear you three stories down, for goodness sake,” Mr. Silver said flatly. “not to mention, you decided to come here at lunch time two days ago.”

“Aw come on!” Florian gestured. “Where’s your sense of fun?”

The man simply went back to reading.

“Good to see you, Silver.” Florian waved.

“You as well.”

“Is he psychic?” Jade questioned Florian as they started down the hall.

“Yeah, it’s super creepy, but he’s cool. Ah, here we go!” Florian opened the door to the room that was bursting with cockatiel noises. Jade was expecting to see cage after cage of fancy colored-cockatiels, but it was actually just a room – full of fully-flighted, free-flying, fancy colored-cockatiels – and doves, and finches, and canaries.

Florian poured a generous amount of birdseed into Jade’s and Peaches’ hands, so over-flowing that it spilled onto the floor, but it made no difference to him. Dozens of cuddly, beautiful birds came flocking for a treat. The boys could only smile.

“So, want a parrot, yet?” Florian teased.

Since Jade was granted permission to have Minty, the school finally decided to officially allow certain types of pets. However, Jade was in over his head with the wild child he already had.

“Only if one finds me.” He oathed.

When they were done, Florian closed the door very particularly.

“I see you, don’t lookit me that way!”

He was talking to the free-roaming big cat, stalking down the hallway. It glared, but did nothing. Peaches carefully raised his arm to take a picture – as the phone clicked, the cheetah glanced it’s wide, intelligent, amber eyes.

“C’mere Shegwa.” Florian called.

It came; Rubbing up against the boys like a normal house cat. The threesome pet her.

“I’ve never touched a man-eating beast before.” Jade stifled an ear-to-ear grin.

“Man-eating beast?” Florian tucked his tie back in as he went to ruffle the cheetah’s neck with a swift, massaging gesture. “Are you a man-eating beast? Huh? Are ya?” He used a playful tone. The big cat just lie on their feet to get it’s belly rubbed, and yawned.

Before having to get back to camp, Florian invited his guests into the kitchen where he asked the butler to warm up some fresh brioches, and Apple Charlotte. As they awaited that, a tray of tangy, creamy, lemon tarts were served straight from the chill rack in the refrigerator. The scrumptious tarts were relished, but soon taken over by the sweet, warm, fragrance coming from the oven. The brioches were

served with golden butter, jams, and flavored honeys, though Florian was content to dunk his in his hot, gourmet-roast coffee. They each got a slice of Apple Charlotte, which was drizzled in vanilla custard before being served.

After trying so hard to eat better, Jade felt a little guilty, but this was the most he had ever seen Peaches eat at a given time, so he didn't bother saying anything.

"Tomorrow, we'll have goat cheese souffle." Florian finished his cafe au lait with a distinguished slurp. He patted his lips with a napkin and checked his watch.

"On the dot. Thanks Bently, we'll see you tomorrow." He slipped off his stool.

"You're awesome, Florian, y' know that?" Jade said on the way back.

"I am." Florian spared no modesty.

"Thank you." Peaches spoke up.

Back at camp, the three were accounted for, and put together as a team for the next project. The objective was to take pictures of plants, animals, animal remnants, shells, and any other food web activity they could find along the shore. Particularly requested specimens would be brought back to the classroom for identification. They would then add their sightings to a log.

"Easy enough." Florian nodded, leading his team away.

"Oh, and one more thing," The unamused counselor gave Peaches a hard stare. "provoking, feeding, and unnecessary interaction with wildlife is strictly prohibited."

"Right?" Florian raised a brow for Peaches' sake. "I mean, duh." He added for good measure. The team walked off, Jade and Florian hoping to keep the mood light.

"What's with that? It's not like we're gonna just pick up an endangered clam and start chowing down."

"We're not?" Jade joked.

"Get real."

The two chuckled heartily, but Peaches wasn't fooled, he knew the counselor's cautionary was for him. He strolled the water's edge, getting his pink tennis shoes soggy and caked with sand.

"Hey Peach, come look at this fish." Jade pointed. Peaches was already back to thinking about the snake incident – or rather, his freezing incident. He turned to the pavilion.

"I'll be right back... Not feeling well" He said, under breath. Jade let him walk back by himself as to not embarrass him, but he made sure Peaches truly was, headed for the pavilion. As soon as Peaches entered the doors, Jade was satisfied to keep wading.

Peaches stood around the empty lobby doing nothing. He just held his head, waiting for his upset body to abate. He tried to breathe slowly like Spencer was always telling him to, and desperately, tried not to cry. He didn't want to make yet another scene. He just watched the pearlized clock face tick upon the wall...

Once he thought he'd gotten control of himself, he went outside, and smacked right into Adrian.

The bully gleefully greeted Peaches with a terrifying smile.

"You really ought to watch your step..."

Peaches stood reactively, but he was now caught between Adrian, the wall, and the coke machines. Peaches froze. He froze so badly, he wouldn't move – even when Adrian reached over to rob the bauble right off of Peaches' neck with the whiplash of the necklace breaking. Adrian ran his thumb over the expensive little pendant with disgust.

"*Think you're so pretty, huh?*"

Peaches didn't even hear or see as he chucked the charm into the palm trees – Peaches was back at his old school, up against the wall as three girls tormented him about his fashions, his poor health, and weakness. He was hammered with the idea that no girl would ever love him, or take him seriously. Already bent on jealousy and unworthiness, the pain drove these girls to hold Peaches down and butcher his long blond hair. This was a memory Peaches had not visited for a *very* long time, but it felt different to him now that he had friends...

Unaware of what was going through Peaches mind, Adrian delighted in it, thinking it was his presence that made Peaches so fearful. That false sense of power dared him to say more.

"So I guess Captain Chocolate's not here to save you this time," He cursed. "I guess he doesn't care about you, after all."

Peaches cracked.

"But Jade *did* saved me... He loves me... Why else would he have bothered to come find me?!"

With that realization, Peaches could move again.

He darted past the trouble maker, shot down the board walk, soared down the dune trail, across the beach, and back to Jade and Florian.

Peaches tripped and fell to the water with a splash, gasping for breath. Jade dropped the seashell in his hand, dropping to his own knees with a wet plunk.

"Peaches, what's wrong? What's wrong?!"

Peaches couldn't talk through his tears – or his smile, but it was okay... He had his answer now.

He was loved – but not by just anybody.

He was loved by his hero...

Although Peaches was fine, Jade took it upon himself to go report Adrian. News of the stalker made Florian quake.

“Y’ know, one day, we outta get him back for everything.”

While the rangers made Adrian skedaddle for the day, the boys were still interested in playing mind games. The next day, the bullies came back to heckle with Jade’s friends, but this time, Peaches was feeling spunky...

Adrian and his crew invited Jade and his pals to a picnic area for a “talk”. Adrian acted sorry, like it was for an apology, but Jade wasn’t sure.

He arrived with Peaches and Florian at flank. Jade could already see Adrian’s lackey pretending to scroll his phone; much like how they’d done when they caught the food fight doosey on camera. Jade sighed... After all he’d done to preach for anti-bullying, Adrian still hadn’t gotten it.

“Hey, y’ brought the whole darn gang... More the merrier!” He reached over to pour each guest a paper cup of sweet iced tea. Florian bravely sipped... It was, in fact, iced tea. Perhaps this *was* about an apology?

Even as Adrian rambled on, Jade and Florian were beginning tell that the boys were waiting for a reaction... But they became blank and queer as Peaches pulled the pair of chopsticks out of his messy, blond, bun.

He used the utensils to pluck one of the squirming grubs out of his cup, and carelessly pop it into his mouth.

The boys gaped, including Jade and Florian.

Shocked and embarrassed that their prank failed mercilessly, Adrian’s group ran off.

Jade and Florian glanced at Peaches. He winked.

“Ever try gaebul in Korea?”

“Don’t even tell me what that is.” Jade slid a nervous grin, but he was glad Peaches had finally gotten the last laugh.

Chapter 10 Ms. Godetia Winters

The drama was finally over. Everyone could finally have fun doing the school projects, hiking, birding, eating around the campfires, and singing to Addison's ukulele. There was even time leftover in a day, to play on the beach, or go for a dip.

Florian continued to have Jade and Peaches over, and the three had many opulent adventures. They were particularly indulgent of coffee at Florian's, but Jade decided it was okay, because it was 5 a.m somewhere. It was all so exciting, but the week soared by so quickly, these were all just fond memories in a matter of moments.

Back at school, Jade sensed darkness on the premises... It was Janice Fonda who came to the boy's doorstep to return Minty, and to relay a letter. Janice stood before Jade with tears in her soft, blue eyes. "She loved you Jade, She had many wonderful last days because of you. She said you gave her hope that the world was a better place than she believed it to be... "

Heather had passed away.

Jade had never experienced anything like this. He had no where else to go but to wander Donogan Academy aimlessly. He sometimes rode his bicycle with Minty on his shoulder, out into town, where Heather's chosen burial was. And as always, he brought his special bouquets of clovers and blow-balls to honor her.

With Halloween around the corner, nobody took the lone boy in the cemetary with a black cat on his shoulder, seriously.

Jade grieved alone.

For someone who didn't know much about life – or death, Jade recovered quickly. He knew that his friends needed him, as did his audiences, so Jade began to focus on the important things in his life, once more.

He still had to go to his classes, but every other spare moment was spent with friends, sharing his message, or devising his next genius plan. But time flew, and with nowhere to go for Thanksgiving, Jade accepted Florian's invitation.

He had a blast that day.

He met Florian's girlfriend, Aleigh, her parents, Mr. Silver was of course there, along with his sister, her baby, and husband, and many, many, friends of the family. Florian's *hilarious* grandparents were the light of the party, and Florian's loving Mother was a wonderful hostess.

Everybody wanted to hear about Jade's talks. Aleigh suggested he do videos and write a book.

"I don't know if I could do *that*..." Jade smiled sheepishly, but the amazed adults persisted. Silver even offered to publish his book, should he ever decide to make the move. The kindness of these beings just warmed Jade's heart.

In addition to that, the French and Scandinavian-influenced Thanksgiving dinner was superb. Jade was sent home with several trays of leftover appetizers and handmade tarts.

Inspired, he left feeling rejuvenated, and full of fresh ideas.

Jade's eyes were so well-washed, it was torture to see everyone else fallen to pieces; Both teachers and students were coming back from holiday in worse shape than before – and it wasn't just the hearty meals – he'd never seen his friends so stressed.

Sundance and Truesdale weren't even acknowledging each other – and it wasn't just a silly fight; their Father had gotten drunk at the family get-together, and now there was nothing they could do but blame each other to feel better.

Alexis and Addison found out that their parents were sick with cancer. Chastity's family wanted no part of him until he found a job. Chase had gained back weight that week. And everybody had forgotten about poor Pidge at the library, who had no family to go to for Thanksgiving.

Jade thanked the heavens that Spencer kept to a quiet, meaningful, celebration; Just he, Peaches, Spencer's parents, and his little old Granny.

Peaches came back from vacation in a fairly good mood.

"I came up with a new song, you wanna be in it?" Peaches urged.

"How can I say no?" Jade grinned, even though he still stung from the very last choir class he'd ever gone to.

Jade was biking through the cold with Minty on his shoulder, almost everyday, to go meet Peaches after school at the Jones's residence.

Before they'd begun jamming together, Peaches finally gave the concert Jade had been asking for. Jade was wowed to hear that Peaches could scream like nothing he'd ever heard before. He couldn't believe small Peaches could roar the words to a song like he was, and aside from that, he could sing

empoweringly, loud, soft, sweet, whatever you wanted from his voice, you could probably request it. Jade was a little self-conscious when it was his turn! He sung, or rather, he tried, but Peaches encouraged him, and he found his voice could be nice at best. It was going to work, but for the hilarity of it, the two spent an hour pretending to sing awfully, taking breaks only to catch their breath from laughing so hard. Spencer had to come upstairs to tell them that they sounded like a drunk party.

“I know!” Peaches burst into laughter all over again, unable to recall how they’d started the whole affair. Spencer was amused.

The boys’ *real* rock duet was finished before Christmas, which gave Jade another awesome idea on how to help Donogan Academy’s community.

The school orchestra not only performed for their usual ballet groups and choirs that Christmas, but also a charity show that Jade organized with Maxwell Donogan’s approval. The gist was that, whatever style, instrument, or vibe you had, anyone was welcome to come play a Christmas song in the amphitheater, which was opened to the public one special weekend. Donations raised money for busy soup kitchens.

The most unexpected of people came together to learn a song so they could participate.

Blaze, Berry, Malcolm, and Josh came with rattles, bongo drums and maracas to perform a tribal version of “Jingle Bells”.

Addison played his beloved ukulele, while Connie hula-danced to a tropically-flared “Rocking Around the Christmas Tree”.

Addison then joined Pidge and Truesdale on the portable, electric organ (supplied by the orchestra), to perform “Silent Night”.

Britt played the upbeat “Charlie Brown Christmas theme” on the grand piano, while Sundance did a funny dance in a snoopy costume, which unfortunately caused him to trip and crash into a nearby Christmas tree.

Peaches went solo, using his hot-pink guitar to dish out a wild version of “The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies”.

Even Sebastian and Janice gave it a try, but their bugle and clarinet were slightly rusty!

Florian and Aleigh dug a super-jazzy duet of “Silver Bells” on their brass saxophones before joining the orchestra as cellists for the event’s fantastic finale...

Jade watched from the stage wing in awe, holding his clip board, feeling like a king. This was what he lived for...

He just wished these moments would last longer...

Before Christmas break, Peaches caught Jade in the hallway.

“Merry Christmas!” Peaches blushed, shoving a package towards Jade. He’d just returned from *Redhood’s Pets*, after a long day of trying to help Josh find homes for their newly arrived shelter cats.

“Aw, thanks, Peach... Please don’t let it be another kitten.”

Peaches shyly laughed as Jade drew the ribbon. He pulled out a brand-new pair of shoes and laughed until his stomach hurt. But he deliberately ditched his dirty, worn sneakers for the ruby-sequined gym shoes that matched his signature red jacket.

“I feel like... The dude of Oz!”

Christmas came, and like all of the magic had been brainwashed from people’s minds, everyone came back from holiday like they’d never recovered from Thanksgiving. Jade could do nothing – and empathizing only sucked the life out of him. This time, he stood back and let the robots complain, drain, and pretend.

“What’s your New year’s resolutions?” Florian asked his friends. His, was to be more productive, effective, and giving.

“I don’t know that I have any resolutions to make,” Peaches swung his feet over the water. “maybe just that I stay out of trouble – and keep Spencer guessing.” He said with a smirk.

Jade sighed into the dark, watching the sky get painted with fireworks.

“This year, I’m going to figure out this mess.”

Peaches and Florian didn’t have to ask; he was talking about his beloved world.

With clearly defined passions, Jade, Florian, and Peaches, stuck together, growing closer than ever. Whenever one was down, they knew who to call. This was definitely the case, one cold, blustery, late Winter morning...

It was Saturday, it was strange... Peaches had called Jade early, asking him to come, not to his house, but to the campus boardwalk; a place that hardly anybody ever used. Jade was fearful to know what it was about, and left as fast as he could, holding his breath...

Peaches was sitting on the end of the pier, decked out in a fur-trimmed hoodie, still wearing pink tennis shoes that swung absentmindedly over the water. His back was turned as he fed the fish and turtles supper scraps from a zip-lock.

“Peaches, what’s wrong?” Jade hurried. Peaches jumped a little – he hadn’t heard Jade come down.

“Oh! You’re here!” He appeared saturated in flattery. He was ruddy in the cheeks. “Jade, I-”

“Are you here by yourself? Didn’t Mr. Jones-”

“Oh but Jade I couldn’t tell him until I told you... I wanted... I...” He was going cold again, but he was clutching his body and rocking it, trying to convince it not to.

“I like you!” He shouted, not meaning to.

“Yeah?” Jade raised a brow. “I like you too, but why-”

“No, no!” Peaches shook his head, making his hair swish about; it was far longer than when Jade had first met him.

“I mean, I *love* you! Would you go to the dance with me?!”

“Dance?” Jade had to think a moment. Then he remembered: The Valentine’s day dance was coming up. He’d already been asked by every single-lady in Donogan Academy, but his answer was always the same. Alexis had taken it personally, and was so bereft, she wasn’t even going at all. Many others fretted about the romantic occasion, but it wasn’t really even on Jade’s radar. If anything, he’d be in the background, helping to throw the party.

But at present, he needed to answer Peaches, and it unfortunately came out like this: “With a *boy*?”

“With *me*.” Peaches stressed, hoping to have not come off as a total creep.

Jade explained the best he could that he wasn’t going with anybody, but that he appreciated Peaches’ courage to ask. Peaches was sorely disappointed, but Jade swiftly lifted his spirit.

“But hey, I just got an idea... Maybe I *can* go with you...” He said with an uncanny smirk.

“Huh?”

“Wanna play a joke?”

Peaches wiped away some discouragement and laughed.

For the next two weeks as students trifled about the Valentine’s day celebration, Jade’s dorm mates kept asking him who he was going with, and how lucky he was to have so many girls asking him out. He just sighed and said: “Oh, but there’s someone else...”

“*What!?*” Sundance exploded. “Who aren’t you telling us about, Jade!?”

“Oh, you know, I met her just the other day... We bumped into each other at the grocery store-”

“And she spilled her purse, and you laughed until you cried?” Chastity rolled his eyes.

“Something like that,” Jade went on, dreamily. “anyway, she’s super sweet – I think – and she’s really cute, and *I think I’m in love!*” Jade dramatically skipped around the room, thinking he should try out for the high school theater.

“This is serious.” Sundance determined. “I told you it was going to happen one day. She must be something if you turned down every other girl here at Donogan!”

“*You have no idea.*” Jade hid his joker face.

Not bothering to change out of his red jacket, ruby shoes, and dirty jeans, Jade helped to host the Valentine’s day bash like he planned to. He mixed punches, carried supplies, set up tables, and decorated alongside the chaperons. When they were done, the hall was adrift in rosy-hued tinsel, balloons, and banners. He had told Peaches to arrive whenever; he’d be under the guise of “Godetia Winters”, wearing a conglomerated costume that was sent to him by J-rock pals in Kyoto, and his K-pop comrades from Seoul.

The party hall was opened. The ladies arrived with their chosen sweethearts; boys were dressed in suits and fancy footwear, some topped with bowlers or fedoras. The girl’s dresses varied greatly, some being flashier or poofier than others, while some preferred to stay sleek.

Milly and Josh came dressed as a Victorian-age couple. Berry and Blaze looked like wealthy celebrities. Britt and Truesdale were clean, modest, and sharp. And Florian and Aleigh came in matching, dark-green, suits. Sundance had picked up one of Alexis’s girlfriends, but from the looks of it, Jade wasn’t sure things were going so well. Chase and Chastity had found dance partners, but they were nervous wrecks before the party had even begun. An envious group of single girls came dressed up, anyway, hoping to steal dates if drama ensued.

The whole thing was completely ridiculous in Jade’s perspective, but then again, he was about to become part of the big joke.

Many dates were invited from outside of Donogan, so there were a lot of strangers Jade had never seen before. Jade had no idea when or where to expect Peaches, so there was a possibility he had bailed out - but to his entertainment, he found that Peaches certainly had not!

A “stunning girl” walked through the door looking a little overwhelmed, but feeling charming.

“Godetia!” Jade shouted, raising a hand so Peaches could see over the crowd. “Godetia” picked up her lacy, double-skirted lolita dress and came running in white, heeled spats. Godetia’s hair was done up in

high-pinned blond curls that he must have used hair extensions for. His face was smoothed and paled by make-up, while his lips were glossed and a tad rosier than usual. He looked like a life-sized doll. It was hilarious.

Godetia jumped on Jade, throwing his arms around his neck, so he could whisper in his ear.

“This is embarrassing!” He hissed, liking it.

“This is gonna be fun!” Jade snickered.

Peaches knew his costuming arts, well, and was so adorable, that many girls had to come talk to the fabulous, “Godetia Winters”. But of course, Godetia was very reserved, and content to stay beside Jade, batting fake lashes, and holding Jade’s prince-like hand. Both Jade and Peaches almost gave themselves away, several times, especially when cheating boys came to check Godetia out.

“Oh isn’t that your date over there?” Godetia would daintily say when the girl came back from the rest rooms or wherever it was. “She looks perfectly concerned, you should go see whatever is the matter.”

Jade was extremely amused by Peaches’ pretend British accent. It really added to the confusion, and made the guise all the better. Jade wasn’t sure where Peaches came up with the fictional character, but Godetia Winters had a whole story of her own, and nobody questioned the tale.

They knew the incognito was spot-on, when even Florian, who knew Peaches well, was duped. He asked if Peaches had ever found a date for the party.

“Nope. He was asked several times, but he has a cherry blossom in Tokyo.”

Godetia nudged Jade.

When the duo found a break, they gave the dance floor a chance, and were surprisingly good – especially with Godetia stepping around in such fancy, old-fashioned high heels.

“You look beautiful tonight.” Jade cracked a smile.

“As do you, handsome.” Godetia replied.

They finally burst, but nobody seemed to notice with all the other hullabaloo in the place. With the gaiety not tickling him so much, Jade questioned Peaches with a more serious tone.

“So why do you do this Peach? Why dress the way you do?”

Peaches got misty.

“I started back at my old school so that no one would make me play sports. My only friend at the time was on a soccer team. He had a concussion and died. I was so scared to get pushed into sports, that being “girly” was the only way I could think of getting out of it. I guess I was already too thin to be forced, but, I just wanted to stay as far away from it as possible.”

Jade did not expect that answer.

“I’m sorry... That’s awful.”

“It was, but I think it allowed me see everyone’s else’s masks when I created my own,” It was ironic for “Godetia” to say this, but Jade knew what he meant. “everyone’s so wrapped up in trying to be the perfect man or woman, they don’t even realize they’re not being human anymore. But *you* remember, Jade... I wish we really were here together,” Peaches whispered. “you’re the only one I’ve ever trusted like this...”

Jade hugged Peaches, Peaches hugged back. But Jade did not falter.

“Peach, you will find someone,” Jade reassured. “if that’s what you want, you will find someone even better than me. And a girl – don’t be afraid, Peach.”

Peaches teared again.

“But Jade! I can’t meet any one new! They’re all on their damn cellphones! Besides, you’re the best, Jade, you have no idea how much you’ve changed my life.”

Quickly, yet timidly, Peaches tried to kiss Jade’s cheek, but Jade pulled back... They instead stared eye-to-eye; a meaningful gaze until they broke out laughing again.

The fake couple returned to the glittering punch tables to see if the chaperons needed any more assistance.

“Bring in those gluten-free vanilla cupcakes,” Sebastian ordered. “we need to cure this chocolate poisoning.”

The boys chuckled and obliged.

Jade plated a few sweets to offer “Godetia”. He nodded indifferently.

“Aw come on, doesn’t it look good, sitting here on this plate, waiting to be devoured by some unsuspecting young lady?”

Peaches was really tossing his gaze now. But he took the cupcake.

“I guess it looks good,” He said. “but it would look even better, on your face.”

That night, Peaches and Jade just let all of their worries slide... They allowed themselves to act like children and recalled how it felt to just let go. Peaches had never smiled so much in his life.

No one ever figured out Godetia Winter’s secret, so the disguise was mischievously used for Easter, and the Spring dance, too. However, their false partnership became real when Jade decided he was interested

in furthering his dance skills. They signed up for a dance camp to keep them on their toes in the Summer.

But before Summer came raining in, Jade answered the call for help from a classmate that Jade did not even know, her guardian, an older sister, fresh out of college, was having trouble paying for her sister's health expenses.

Jade collected donations, mowed lawns, threw sales, and did more work at Josh's favorite pet store, alongside his part-time at the pizzeria. Peaches could tell Jade wasn't getting enough sleep.

"I have an idea," Peaches mocked Jade's famous line. "why don't you ask for help?"

"Good idea."

Friends near and dear gathered for a weekend to wash cars.

So many students showed up to help, that it was more like a party than it was a car wash. It became one of Jade's fondest memories.

Everyone had fun, and felt utterly proud of their hard work and bounty. The money was presented to the siblings without warning; they cried happy tears Jade would never forget.

Before leaving for Summer vacation, Blaze stopped Jade in the hall.

"Hey boy, I just wanted to say that I really admire you. I totally respect what you've done around here. I wish I were more like you."

"Thanks Blaze, it's really just about integrity."

"I can imagine. doesn't it get tough though?"

"You make sacrifices here and there," Jade reached for his neck. "and I'm sorry if that takes my attention away from friends, sometimes... Alexis has already complained."

"Oh Jade, you don't do anything wrong. If more people did what you do, the world would be a better place."

"I'm not that unbelievable am I? I just like solving problems is all-"

"No Jade, you're more than that, you're-"

"Stan A. Solve!" Jade proclaimed off the top of his head. "You got problems, Stan can solve them!"

Blaze, only thinking it a joke, just giggled before saying goodbye.

Jade turned heel, headed for the big rock in the back of the girl's dorm...

Lave Santos glanced; his glances had become more glassy over the months. He still asked the same things of Jade, only, his voice had grown monotonous. His body, more emaciated. He twiddled thumbs over the blade of his bayonet, contemplating if this futile surviving was worth anything in the end. Immediately Peaches came to mind, and Jade's heart bled, but there was still nothing he could do for this ghost.

"Lave? Lave Santos? Can you hear me? Who is Stan A. Solve?"

Lave peered from his huddled ball of body, but all he did was mutter on.

"Rving doesn't work you madman... It never did... You can't remote view you fool, it was a lie..."

Lave was talking to himself.

Jade paused.

Remote view? He thought. He'd once read of this phenomenon – it seemed impossible, but so was this "viewing" of the almost two-hundred year-old, Lave Santos.

"Lave, *who is Stan A. Solve?!*" Jade called.

The boy just stared and murmured.

Chapter 11

Goodbye Minty

Summer came and spread like wild fire, piece by piece, students, teachers, and friends headed home for Summer break. Jade was not interested in going home. Instead, he worked long nights writing new speeches on new subjects.

He started that book. He started those videos. Peaches and Florian got in on the action. They helped Jade record, and teamed up to supply background music.

Peaches' specialty was the guitar, but he could exercise a synthesizer or a drum set if he had to. Florian was an adept cellist, violinist, harpist, pianist, and saxophone player, but since he understood music theory like the back of his hand, he could easily pick up a random instrument and start rocking out. The two musicians nagged Jade to learn something over the Summer, so Jade painstakingly chose the violin.

He knew nothing about it except that he liked the sound, and Florian's violin was a marvelous masterpiece to behold. It's majestic, fragile, curvature, and flaming grain made it deliciously intriguing – Jade just wished he could make it sing like Florian could.

Aside from their musical endeavors, the boys were constantly at Florian's for tennis, boating, and swimming. Peaches had to be taught how to swim, since he didn't know how, and he rather resented the lessons at first, but it soon became his favorite thing to do; going for a cool dip by the coast after a burning, frustrating, body-contorting dance practice.

“How'd you get me into this!” Peaches would say at the ballroom.

Florian kept the two ignited, for he and Aleigh were skilled tangoists. The boys were a little surprised since Aleigh came off to them as rather serious – though they were quickly corrected, because she *was* serious. There was something commandeering about her jet-black crew-cut, red lips, and stern hazel gaze. She was the tallest teenager they had ever met; even exceeding most boys, which gave she and Florian a contrasting appearance.

When things were unclear at dance class, the devoted couple stepped in.

“Dance. One day it will just come to you,” Aleigh assured their success. “kind of like how all the sudden, BAM! I got algebra.”

Peaches trotted off with a coy exterior.

“I never got algebra either!”

Peaches was clearly frustrated with his weak body. He was ready to quit dancing, swimming and playing tennis, altogether. He was falling back into old, depressive habits – his inadequate body reminded him. But Jade and Florian kept pushing, and Peaches got mad.

It was Jade and Peaches first fight; whether to continue on with the dance lessons or not. Jade wanted to keep going, but Peaches didn’t want him to find another partner. After some discussion, Spencer nailed Peaches with some impeccable reason to finish what he started, so Peaches humbly went back to Jade. The argument dissolved, and they returned to the dance hall to train relentlessly, day in, and day out. Peaches grew stronger, and so did his passion. Small stage performances began to kill Peaches habit of freezing. Halfway through the Summer, Florian boldly suggested they enter the local beginner’s competition.

“Are you trying to make me crazy?” Peaches snapped. But he was ready.

The lights were killed.

Jade and Peaches could hear one another breathing excitedly as the black-out occurred. One, piercing, white spotlight poured down on just them - and the speckless, polished, rosewood stage. They remained poised, gazing in a self-induced trance so that they would not become distracted by stage fright – though Jade peeked over his self-veil to snatch a glance at Peaches whom was bordered in black, and shimmering in cosmetics. But it was Peaches’ green irises Jade wanted: They shared a look that really said something – something Jade couldn’t define.

Gold, pink, and red lights smacked down on them. The music blared. Off they went – in an attractive fluency that made their bodies feel like they were speaking. Their tribal, animal-spirit costumes sparkled in the spotlights so much, it looked as though glitter fell from them, every time they took a turn. Every dance move felt like heavy cream; Silky because they knew their part so well, but heavy, because they were exhausted. Yet they knew this was the moment they had waited for...

As Jade paused in place, watching Peaches duke it out with his solo, he sat in awe of the boy whose body fell and rose so liquidly, strong, and healed... He could hardly imagine this was the same boy who once believed that he didn’t even want to be here.

Peaches swept back into Jade’s gravity, and he, stepped into Peaches’, they revolved like moons until the final act of using one another’s momentum to go twirling off after Jade swung Peaches over his back, out of grasp, and finally, out of his orbit. The finishing touch was a synchronized freeze.

The song ended, the room cheered. Jade was beaming. Peaches smiled brightly. They shared a grappling hug before exiting stage.

There were five couples left before the top three would be tallied for the titles and a rewarded encore. Florian came flying from the audience to humorously get his tie autographed by the finalists. Aleigh applauded proudly.

Jade and Peaches accepted third place that night, but their glamorous, last dance was worth more than any prize they could have won. They were congratulated by many, including Britt Bronwyn, whom unexpectedly erupted from the audience to felicitate them.

“Oh my goodness!” She exclaimed of Peaches. “You’re looking so nice!”

It was true. Peaches had healed of his conditions over the months. Britt turned to Jade.

“Jade,” Britt said with sorrow. “I owe you one. Thank you for everything. I know I didn’t always listen, but you were right...”

She and Truesdale had finally split. It was the best thing she had ever done for herself.

The last week of Summer vacation was spent on the shore. Florian was out with Aleigh for the day, so Jade and Peaches walked the beach trail themselves, picking up litter as they wandered down the path; This only gave Jade the idea to bring a recycling project back to school when he returned, but for now, he just allowed himself to be in the nature.

The lemon beams of sunset were shooting through the glossy boughs of pines. The trees gave off a prickly fragrance. They walked to the water’s edge, where Jade interjected the ohm.

“Can you tell me a secret?”

Peaches threw a sweet glance full of mint sparkles.

“If you tell me one.”

“Why did you try to kill yourself?”

Peaches was now fifteen, he’d been through so much since his dying days that it felt like eons since he’d felt such hopelessness and despair, though it really hadn’t been that long at all. He closed his eyes for the moment, sad, but tranquil.

“I didn’t want to be anything anymore. Not who people were defining my age as, what it meant to be a boy, what it meant to be mentally handicapped, physically unable. People didn’t even want me to be an artist. I didn’t want to be *their* version of a human! Because if being me was not an option, it felt like everyone just wanted me dead. I would have rather been water, a bird, a tree... But I discovered that

being myself wasn't what people told me it was. You came along... And I finally realized that people are meant to be a little bit more like you, *kind, fearless*—”

Jade chuckled.

“I wouldn't say fearless...” Jade's mind went swimming into the shade. “It's my turn...” He smiled.

Peaches stepped closer, his face lit like a candle. From a twinkling laugh, came a sparkle-eyed question. “What you're afraid of?”

Jade nodded. He cupped a hand to his mouth as if it mattered that the gulls and fish heard.

“I fear what I love the most.”

Peaches body language was uncertain, his pretty face, puzzled.

“What do you mean?”

“I really, really, *really*, like people. I wish I could make everyone happy. I wish I could go back in time and stop people from fighting, hating, and killing each other – and themselves. I wish people could see each other as beings who only want love, kindness, and respect. I want the best for others, because I love humans... I'm just terrified of them.”

Peaches was wordless for a very long time.

“Yes, I wish that too, but you say that like you're an alien or something. We're human too, just as awful, just as faulted, no one will ever be—”

“But maybe we're *not*.” Jade challenged him. Peaches was too overwhelmed to properly contemplate what Jade was trying to imply. He gave up. That was the end of their conversation for the night.

It was night. They had stayed out late into the evening. They gazed at the stars until they accidentally fell to sleep. Jade mused about those harrowing stars...

Silent darkness was invaded by sunrise. It rose out of the shadowy blues, transforming them into a multitude of golds, lavender, and violets. The sand felt like snow, crystalline in the same hues. Faint, cool, breezes blew just enough to make small ripples on the waveless water. Peaches stood at the shore, where the gently, lolling, liquid licked his barefooted toes every now and then. Jade sat up, gazing to the horizon as if the place were all but a dream...

Peaches now leaned into the water, sticking his fingers into the wet sand. He grabbed a fistful of silty mud; fascinated eyes remained on the grains even as the back of his shirt dipped in the emerald water, but it didn't much matter after he gracefully vanished beneath the reflections.

Jade thought they should be leaving, but his own feet were wet too...

Peaches cracked through the glassy surface, holding his nose, as he was still not the most adept of a swimmer. Jade needed no beckoning to jump in after Peaches. Peaches laughed like a chime.

They went under, together.

The verdant water gaped around them, salt briefly stinging their eyes before getting used to it. The fiery lavender color that sparkled from above, was simply the mirror that entrapped the crimson and intense wine of the Sun coming up. Bubbles danced sporadically, lit like swishing jewels that fought to get to the surface, or, clung to Jade and Peaches like sentimental jewelry.

It was so beautiful, Jade almost breathed.

They came up for air to the softer tones of the atmosphere. Peaches' eyes were hit by the Sun, matching the sea in both hue and glimmer. He blinked dew-glittered lashes, breathed in gasps, and smiled, kissing the water's surface. Jade smiled too, he could not help it.

The two just floated there, standing on tip-toes in the temperate salt water. There were a few joggers and vacationers starting to dot the strip of beach. The two hadn't said a word until now; Jade could feel Peaches breath on his clammy skin.

"I think I finally get what you were trying to tell me back during the Valentine's day party... I might find somebody, or something else, that's better to love... But you will always be one of my favorite human beings. I think that's what fooled me. I was starstruck by the way you cared... But now I believe in people again, and I'm ready to take on this world." He suddenly laughed. "Sorry, does that make sense?"

"I think it just means you were inspired... And that we *are* best friends." Jade grinned. He fist-bumped Peaches forehead. Peaches chuckled, flashing his ocean-green irises. He unexpectedly swore, causing him to cover his grin.

Jade looked up to see Florian waving a hand kerchief as he was dragged by Shegwa on her chain lead, making Florian ski on the white sand. It was not Florian Peaches was concerned of – Spencer Jones was right behind Florian, frantically holding a phone in the air. Spencer had gotten in contact with Florian because Peaches had accidentally left his phone at home, but it was not the fact itself that Spencer had come for – there was news.

Peaches was completely dumbstruck until he could hear Spencer shout: "It's Hasegawa!"

Peaches' face lit like he had just broken a record.

"Hasegawa Tadashi San, desu?!" He jumped out of the water, sopping in his fully-clothed body to take the super-important call in intense, formal, Japanese. It was a short, smart, call that Peaches, though the speaker could not see, bowed to, at the end. He snapped the phone shut and screamed, leaping into

Spencer's arms, despite still being soaked. He was swung in circles, and the lunatics danced in celebration of the new adventure in their grasp.

The moment had come. Peaches received an invitation to be part of a band in Kyoto. He was healthy and fit enough that Spencer trusted he would take care of himself in Japan, and as soon as Spencer had settled and secured his own business, he'd go to see his live shows when he was on vacation.

It was elatingly momentous for Peaches, but also very bittersweet.

He and Jade may not be face-to-face for the next several years.

It was on Jade's last visit to the Jones's house, that he brought something special to celebrate their last day together...

"I found it under the big rock by the forest at school," Jade explained. "I kept forgetting about it, but I think it's time to see what's inside."

"It's really pretty... I've never seen anything like it, looks old." Peaches rambled about the golden box's enigmatic beauty.

Jade snapped his penknife open and slid it under the box's lid. He had Peaches squeeze the top to release the lip from the rusted crease that had jammed the box closed for so many years... Pop!

Jade and Peaches jerked back in alarm – the knife had got them both. Peaches freaked, concerning himself with cleaning the stain off the carpet before Spencer saw. It was as if he didn't even feel the cut...

The box lie ajar until the mess was gone. Jade was wiping the box itself, when he finally saw what was spilling out. He swabbed the medallion of their blunder as well, realizing they'd broken a bit of glass in their attempt to reveal the treasure. He held the medallion up to the light...

The large, double-pronged cross cradled an exaggerated golden skull with green gemstone eyes. There had been a tiny bottle wedged between the face's teeth before the boys broke it, but the medallion still glimmered like the sacred artifact it was meant to be... It was rattling, but mesmerizing...

"Bizarre..." Peaches said hypnotically. "I wonder who it belonged to?"

"Don't know... But it feels... familiar..." Jade blinked slow in curiousness. These were the last of their words for awhile...

Jade and Peaches jolted up so quickly, they clanged heads.

"Ow!" they cried, laughing as they realized Spencer had caught them napping away the afternoon.

"I thought you two were coming up with one last song before shipping out – what happened to your hand?" Spencer spied Peaches' band-aid. Jade hid his own hands – but the cut was gone...

"Um, snapped a guitar string." Peaches lied. Jade gave him a scolding glimpse, but it was apparently a reasonable story because Spencer took it.

"Well, it's about time to start wrapping things up," Spencer reminded. "we leave for the airport at five." Peaches threw his arms around Jade.

"I'll call you! Promise to call me!"

"I promise."

Jade felt unusually bad that night. He pondered if he was really that sad and attached to Peaches that he'd be sick over the thought of him being gone. He always had Florian and the boys, and he was sure he'd make new friends just as good, but this positive thinking didn't stop him from having nightmares that tossed and turned him until day break. He woke to the early morning, disturbedly recalling his dream of a purple night sky, ablaze and inbedded with stars, planets, and galaxies, moons, comets, and swirling, glittering, golden explosions. His old imaginary friend, Captain Hullabaloo, hung in this wafting, living, Universe and brashfully told Jade this: "This is how it was, how it's been, and always will be... Stan A. Solve."

Jade shot up with his heart thumping like a drum.

This would not be his last, other-worldly experience.

Jade was glad he got to the airport at all, to hug and wave Peaches goodbye.

Everything felt so vibrant, the Sun was almost too bright... Jade almost couldn't even walk straight, his body seemed too easy to use. The world looked confoundingly different – but one thing stayed the same – Jade seemed like the only one who noticed it, and could do nothing but move on.

Jade and Florian returned to Donogan Academy with dread in their lungs. The school had taken on an entirely new face, and it shook them to the core.

Chase and Chastity had dropped out, one of Alexis's girlfriends had dropped out, there were many broken hearts from over the Summer, and of course, someone got pregnant. School itself had undergone changes – classes pulled, teachers swapped. Students threw tantrums over the fact that there would be no more art or music. On just the third day, Adrian and friends were caught in the act of spray-painting an insult on the wall of the gymnasium. The delinquents were suspended.

Many old peers turned to Jade to “do something!”, but this was all out of his hands...

With the loss of students, new ones were introduced; Jade was particularly acquainted with a younger boy, Chike Cain, whom could have been Jade’s twin with all the kindness in his heart. The only difference was, he was not nearly as full of spit and vinegar as Jade, thus often had to be rescued in the halls from the ruckus-causers.

To everybody’s disdain, Truesdale was still the janitor – and still out to kill, but this year he’d taken on the art of convincing others to do his dirty work. He messed with the feeble of heart, and spawned a new generation of narcissists.

He got away with another year of nonsense.

On a better note, if it meant anything at all, Jade had completed his book and presented it to Mr. Silver.

“What’d y’ think?”

“Good, but it feels unfinished. Rewrite the last two chapters, and put more crypt in chapter twelve, you don’t want the reader to think they know everything.”

Jade went back to work.

He got advice from G.L., and took suggestions from Florian. He was inspired by times he shared with Peaches. He’d contemplated many things because of the Lave Santos’ ghost. Young Chike and his best friend, gave Jade ideas as they worked in the community garden. But he just wasn’t sure...

He was writing about miracles; never giving up. But he just didn’t feel like he’d truly embraced the fact...

He was so ambitious, he had such fantastical plans, his mind was a miraculous playground entertaining the best of questions – But sometimes, it felt like he was the only one who thought so – which begged him to ask the integrity of his writing.

Needing an immediate answer, the Universe slapped him in the face.

Minty suddenly died.

Jade was so shocked, he couldn’t hand her over to the clinic. Instead he asked Pidge if he could bury her on his property, where he’d still be able to easily visit her little grave stone. Pidge was entirely agreeable, and even brought Jade flowers to plant atop Minty’s resting place.

Jade was then left alone to part with his beloved cat, but as he dug, he grew very frustrated.

He unburied a rusty horseshoe, a tin mug, a dresser handle, and he had to dig around some large object that he couldn't even pull out of the ground. Finally, wrapped in her favorite blanket, Minty was rested. As Jade planted the beautiful little daisy bush that Pidge had gotten him, his fingers ran through the soil only to catch a metal chain, caked with clay. He pulled it out of the dirt to find a small, metal, plate, dangling on the end. It was too dirt-covered to read, but he pocketed it out of curiosity.

The moment he turned around, he could not believe his eyes.

A little gray kitten was frolicking under Pidge's gardenias.

Jade wiped the tears off his nose.

"I'm never gonna have another cat, you hear me? I'm going to leave you here, and Pidge will find you, and pity you. I will never have another cat, do you understand?"

Jade marched out of the library's backyard towards the boy's dorm.

The tiny, gray kitten, followed.

Jade was overflowing with exasperation as he carried the kitten back to the dorm. Still weary and bleary, he wasn't watching where he was going, and bumped into a fellow student laden with library books, which flopped to the sidewalk upon collision.

Jade apologized profusely, but Britt was laughing. She too, had been completely lost in thought.

As they picked up, Britt quickly realized why Jade was short-handed; her sleep-deprived eyes actually lit. Jade told the story and let Britt coddle the kitten, but before she could badger Jade for it's name, the two had to step out of the lamp lights to remain unseen...

A noisy, galumphing pair of footsteps trod across from them, meandering the opposite direction while carelessly throwing a beer bottle into the bushes. On a better day. Jade would have tracked and reported such a sighting, but tonight, he just didn't want to know.

Britt became emotional.

"What's happened to people?" She shook her head. Jade caught her wind almost automatically.

"Something awful... Something big. Something that taught our parents to fear instead of live, just like theirs' before. Something that happened a long time ago that we just haven't gotten over..."

Britt wasn't expecting Jade to spew such an answer, but it felt like he'd hit the nail on the head. That had been exactly the case of Truesdale.

Ready to part ways, the two were stopped by another jarring sound that made them step back into the darkness – but the shallowed breath, chunky chains, and withered whimper of the young, lost, Lave Santos was nothing to be scared of – for Jade, anyway. He now knew the sight, well.

Britt gasped, and stepped into Jade's shadow for safety.

Jade was astounded that Britt could see him too.

"Um, Jade, *what is that?*" Britt's voice shook at the famished, chained, writhing, creature. Jade hardly blinked.

"That," Jade said with pain. "is what we've all done to ourselves."

Jade had packed all of Minty's things for donating elsewhere, but he was taking them out, all over again. As the slate kitten climbed his pant leg, meowing for food, Jade rewash all of Minty's old food bowls, and threw the dirty chain necklace he'd found into the sink to be washed off as he scrubbed.

The kitten gobbled up the last of Minty's leftover kibble, drank some water, and curled up in Minty's old bed.

It was like he knew no other life.

Jade sighed.

Jade went to the bathroom sink to put away the soap and sponge and retrieve the strange chain. With the debris cleared away, Jade could clearly read the name that was soldered into the tag.

"Stan A. Solve..." He whispered aloud.

The rest of the school year was not dedicated to school, but rather, searching for Stan A. Solve.

Jade raided the library, looked it up on the internet, but nowhere could he find a Stan A. Solve connected to Donogan Academy. There was nothing and no one by that name related to Lave Santos, the Donogan's, or anybody mentioned in the academy's history. Jade was hungry to know more, but the inexplicable Stan A. Solve remained the stuff of legend.

Jade knocked on the door of Ambrose Godwin's office. He opened up, greeting Jade with a hard stare.

"Come in, come in, before someone else finds out." He ushered Jade inside of his little museum.

Jade plopped the bakery box on top of Godwin's desk and opened it. A small, mandarin-cream cake was unveiled.

"I hate cake." Godwin said as he moved to cut it. Jade just smiled, he now knew Godwin too well.

"Happy Birthday, Ambrose."

"Thank you. Do sit down, I have to tell you about this woman. I think I must be crazy."

Jade had already met Lady Scarlet. In fact, he was the one who had sent her Godwin's way. He was glad they were falling in love.

After the refreshingly, citrus-sweet cake, Jade handed Godwin a well-dressed gift box.

“I hate presents.”

“But you like antiques.” Jade laughed.

Godwin gave a small smile and opened the box, inside, was a box, the little golden box that Jade had found. The medallion was still inside, where it belonged.

“I found it awhile back, it’s beautiful, it’s interesting, but I have no use for it. I thought you might like it, it looks old.”

Godwin stared for a long time. It almost seemed familiar, but he didn’t bother saying so. He kept to his usual facade.

“I shall cherish it. It is most peculiar. Looks quite valuable. Are you sure you don’t want to hang onto it?”

“Nah, I’m minimizing. It’s best with you.”

“Thank you.” The old man finally held Jade’s gaze with true affection. He coughed to clear his throat.

“I... I do believe... I will miss you, Mr. Jewel.”

Jade paused to understand Mr. Godwin’s sentence. The school year was almost over, and it was Jade’s last year. His parents would be sending him to the college across the state, where it was unlikely he’d see familiar faces. He didn’t even know what he was going to do there. If he couldn’t speak, if he had no time to volunteer, if he felt like he was wasting precious time, he knew he’d just fall to the same fate that Peaches had been headed for. Anything that kept him from the bigger picture, made him cringe.

He knew he had to find a way out, but he didn’t know what to do.

Not yet, anyway.

Chapter 12

Donogan's Secret

Jade's cellphone twittered. He glanced at the number.

“Moshi moshi-”

“Oh Jade! I can't believe I did it!” Peaches blurted with a giggle from the other end.

“Did what?” He smiled at Peaches' tone as he nonchalantly cleared the dorm room desk.

“I cried on stage! They know the words to our songs! It's amazing!”

Jade laughed.

“Oh gosh! Good job, love it!”

“Yeah, it's so strange, I'm truly living in a dream! I never guessed this would really happen. It seems like just yesterday I was singing for my life – writing and singing about things I could see that seemingly no one else did – but now, endlessly, strangers tell me they feel the same way. Oh Jade, I'm so excited, it's like I'm back in the world, back on track, back in the flow! It's so strange, but I'm happy...”

Jade was beaming. He'd already been able to tell Peaches' fortune had finally come from all of the pictures and videos he'd sent over the months; some would have said he was an instant success, but Jade knew Peaches and his four band members had worked their butts off to get where they were. He was extremely joyful for Peaches, and hated to dampen the energy, but there was something on his mind that only Peaches could answer for him. When the moment seemed right, Jade's shadow slipped in.

“How did you do it? How did you get out of those dark places?”

Peaches paused.

“Jade, if you're in trouble, you can tell me.”

“I'm not in trouble...” Jade scored into the waste basket across the room. “I just want to do something grander than dragging on with this whole school thing.”

“You are doing grander things! Aren't you still speaking? Didn't you finish your book?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but if I go to college, I won't have time for that. Peach, my dream is to change the world, not repeat what has already been done.”

“Then just don't go.”

Jade stopped mid-swipe of polishing the desk off. It was so simple, it made Jade feel dumb.

“I just had an idea – What if, I just didn't go?”

Peaches burst into laughter. But Jade was still muddled.

“It's just – if I don't go, where do I go?”

Peaches could only offer Jade advice. He had no answer for that. Jade understood. It was, really only something he could find out for himself, he just hoped he'd get an idea soon, because his parents, teachers, and even some of his peers were beginning to pressure, doubt, and criticize him. He couldn't be a "hero" for his teenage class mates anymore, because soon, they would all be grown up, and he couldn't save them from the problems that would come of that.

Jade looked around at all the destinies set in stone.

Florian, armored with online businesses, a five-year schedule, and foretold greatness, was pumped for college. He planned to marry Aleigh on the coast when he finished school, and was stoked about the rest of his life.

Britt was currently working at Janice's tea shop, she planned to seriously study herbalism, botany, and agriculture when she left for college.

Her excitable sister plotted to run away with Addison to Hawaii, where Addison could continue to surf, teach, and support environmental research. There, he and Illiad would get married and open a salon for both men and women, called "Dudes Too".

Pidge was content to stay at Donogan Academy's library for the rest of his days, preserving that beautiful place; but it was what made him feel proud, so Jade was happy for him.

Berry Bury planned to go on, playing professional football, while his cunning bud, Malcolm, a super hard worker, had saved himself enough money to drop everything and travel the world once he was deemed graduated. Sherry had also had enough of football; she was now aiming to join the police force.

Milly and Josh didn't know what else they wanted than to be together and care for animals. G.L, continued to write...

Unfortunately, not everyone was as determined or clarified as these individuals.

As Connie and Averell struggled to keep dance lessons on their radar, they knew college would soon replace them. Hank was off to college. Blaze was off to college. Sundance was due for college. Alexis, ruefully, was headed for college too, but none of them really knew what they wanted from it. They were just going.

As for Truesdale? The last Jade heard of him was that he'd worked himself to the bone to get the education he needed to join the prestigious Donogan Academy Robotics lab, but before he finished, he was kicked out for breaking laboratory rules. He could not come to terms with his offense, and became something of a solicitor. He got himself arrested, and now, Donogan only knew Truesdale's face as one belonging to a felon.

Truesdale's dream was crushed, and he let it crush him.

Jade could see it everywhere... Dreams somberly slipping away...

Jade stepped into the milky moonlight. It seemed like so long ago that he'd first witnessed the ghost of Lave Santos; wandering circles, dragging chains, crying out, from hunger and pain.

Jade gazed to the stone where Lave sat, filmy, fleeting, and haunting in his heart-wrenching ways. Jade cocked his head in sorrow, whispering in desperation.

"Why do I feel so much like you right now? Trapped, no where to go, isn't it selfish? I have so much – I even have a life! You don't even have *that*. But why? Why do you remind me so much of *me*?"

Lave was quiet, still running fingertips over the silver edge of his old bayonet wondering if death was the only way out...

Jade suddenly wondered about this "ghost" – *why*, and *how*, could a *ghost* contemplate killing itself? Lave Santos was already dead.

Right?

Jade walked around the stone, stepping up to a ledge of rubble so he could see eye-to-eye with Santos. He wasn't sure if he could, but he reached out to touch the soldier – He couldn't.

"Lave? Lave Santos? Tell me again, what am I supposed to do? How can I change this?"

"Call yourself Stan A. Solve at the entrance of Camp Pinto... Stan A. Solve... Camp–" He sounded delirious.

"**Where** is Camp Pinto?"

Lave got a funny look on his face like he was having a hard time swallowing, but his eyes were now lit like little blue fires. Something had been rekindled in that question... He burst.

He responded to Jade as if they sat face-to-face. It was so real.

He told Jade where to find Camp Pinto - he told Jade that, and more. He told Jade everything, because he suddenly understood it all.

This wasn't just some crazy experience – Lave had been trying to contact someone for a very long time, all for the sake of saving he and his brothers, whose successful mission would result in saving *thousands of lives*. And if Jade didn't already know, Lave stated the consequence.

"And should you succeed," Lave's baby-blue eyes filled with tears. "you will change history."

"Don't you mean, *make* history?" Jade smiled a bit. Lave shook his head.

"No, I mean, *change*."

Jade had his answer. *He would go to Camp Pinto.*

As Jade packed his small share of the dorm room, Florian paid his dear friend one last visit.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.” Florian pat Jade on the back. Jade grinned; Graduation was only a few months away.

“You know me too well.” Jade zippered up a backpack, full of his only possessions.

“Well, I hope a gypsy like you has room for one more thing-” Florian moved to hand Jade a small, soft-bodied instrument case.

“Oh I couldn’t-”

“Yes you can,” Florian gifted Jade his fine violin. “if this is the last time I see you, I want to make sure I gave it my all.”

“It means a lot, Florian.” Jade gave him a hug. Reluctant to shed tears over this, Florian blinked rapidly. Jade’s little gray cat, now named Tsuki, came bounding up to be doted on by Florian. He casually obeyed.

“You sure you wanna drop out like this? Graduation is right around the bend-”

“I just can’t waste any more of my time. I know what I’m supposed to be doing now, isn’t that what school was for?”

“You’d think.” Florian answered, but with an unsure expression. “well anyhow... Jade, if you ever need anything, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Florian.”

Florian nodded, turning to leave, but then chortled, taking an item from his stuffed book bag.

“Oh hey, I almost forgot, Silver handed it in, what do you think?”

Jade embraced the book in Florian’s hands, awed at the cover that read a title and author he recognized because he’d picked the words himself.

Silver had published Jade’s book.

Florian left the copy with Jade, and again, bid farewell. Jade flipped through his own writing to acknowledge what he’d accomplished, but he decided to give the book to Godwin as a parting gift.

Godwin was hysterical.

“You are doing *what*?! But graduation is practically here! Are you out of your mind, Jewel?! You cannot drop out after all you’ve done!”

“Graduation is still months away, a lot could happen in that time. I’m not going to waste it here. Something’s pulling at me...Someone needs me. I was meant to be there for people.”

“A whim?!” Godwin raved.

“If I died tomorrow, I’d rather have went chasing this gut feeling than sat around, waiting for graduation day. Does that not make sense?”

“It does, you outrage me.” Godwin said, but with a straight face. He drew a long, exasperated breath.

“Well then... Goodbye... I will miss you. And... Thank you, you made many better memories for all, here at Donogan Academy, and I won’t forget that, Stan A. Solve.”

Godwin had noticed Jade’s chosen pen name.

“Thank you, Ambrose.” He said, clutching the rusty dog tag around his neck.

Many did not believe Jade was really going to do it. How could he leave? How could he just drop all of the good he’d done at the academy and proclaim his work finished? Alexis was particularly doubtful. She still expected to see Jade’s face before graduation. She was so desperate to see that busy beam of light again, she looked for the Jewel family’s address and knocked at the front door. No one was home. She gave up.

Dear Diary,

“I’m not going to sit here with a job a robot could have, pretending my problems are the only problems in the world. I’m not going to pretend there aren’t starved, ill, and less fortunate humans out there, and childishly say I have nothing to do with it. I am a human, too! I’m not going to waste my life being normal so that people can use me to continue executing mindless loops of ineffectiveness. I want to live a life I can be awed of. I’m going to get my hands dirty, and lead! And if I fail, it will be nobody’s business but mine. I want to prove that my great Grandmother didn’t pull herself from the rubble of Hiroshima for nothing! I am here! And something is dying to get out – something divine, somebody powerful, the spark that is burning within all of us.

What kind of life will you choose? The one that’s laid out for you, or the one you carve with your own blood, sweat, and tears? With your own love, passion, and dignity? I’m going to live a life knowing it was mine. And I want you, to do the same...

This was the most profound paragraph to me, from the inspirational book that Jade left us some time ago. I practically finished reading it in one day, leaving me both awed, jealous, and confused. I bleed to know that these things are true, yet I still wander around, looking for answers, yearning for clarity...I don't have Jade's guts – I don't have his heart – yet he so firmly believed we all have some sort of power. A spark. There are times I really, really, want to trust that, but then again, maybe I'm just crazy.

Or maybe Jade was crazy.

But he didn't have my parents, and he didn't have my problems.

I may never know...But one thing is sure...Jade, you were a rare jewel. Good luck, wherever you are, I hope you find all that you were looking for.

-Alexis

A tear gingerly plinked into the paper of Alexis's journal, wrinkling the page as another quickly followed. She turned to the sound of the apartment doorbell, knowing her boyfriend was awaiting with a bouquet of birthday flowers. No, she didn't love him. She just needed someone to play that role, and be there before it was too late.

As predicted, a lot happened in those few months, all except Jade's return to the academy. Many of his friends wondered what happened to him, for a number of them had been forever influenced by Jade's empathy. Even teachers and peers who'd never warmed up to the boy, often pondered where Jade Jewel went off to...

For awhile Jade wandered the streets taking odd jobs, playing his violin, and searching for opportunities to do good in return for a lift. He was kept company by Tsuki, who hitchhiked in his backpack when he wasn't leading the way. Stray animals, trees, and strangers; they were all Jade's friends and for the most part, they were all on his side. On his way to Camp Pinto, he stopped to share his time, music, and wisdom with other homeless beings. He fondly wondered whatever happened to Rob...

For awhile he still talked to Peaches on the phone, but one evening he had to watch the phone get crushed under a truck after dropping it from his bicycle. He couldn't afford a new one.

Jade was glad his last conversation with Peaches was a meaningful one.

After a lengthy subway ride – just another small step taken towards his occult destination, Jade exited the platform only to find that the weather was raging. The bad thunderstorm had him ducking into the next diner to spend his last ten bucks on something warm, hearty, and filling. The diner had red leather window seats, a bar, and blaring-red coffee tables. There were a few families, and two old men behind local newspapers, already eating there.

Tsuki was courteous enough to keep himself hidden in Jade's bags while they took cover for nearly an hour. It was still pouring when Jade looked up, barely coughing on his last good meal in total surprise at the very next man who stumbled into the diner – Truesdale.

Still blind and bumbling, Truesdale requested something at the front counter – the lady pointed to Jade, apparently giving Truesdale the exact coordinates of Jade's seat. But still, Truesdale would have had to have known Jade was here.

The haunched, ragged man, topped with packs and a roll of sleeping bag much like Jade was dragging around, dropped his belongings like a sack of grain. He dusted his palms and stretched to relieve himself of the ache the load gave him. There was familiarity in the man's longish, dark hair, and dim, cruel eyes. But it was the ugly demeanor Jade knew best.

"Truesdale, what are you doing here? You didn't come looking for me, did you?"

"Wish I had those answers but I don't, I don't know why any of this happened... Sheer bad luck." He hissed. The waitress came to take Truesdale's order of coffee and chowder, and was gone in a blink, but just as fast, Truesdale continued his rant, this time, starting with the point.

"All I know is, your little Lave Santos fairy tale had better be true, cause I didn't come all the way out here to chase a pathetic fable–"

"*What do you know about that?!*" Jade stuttered. Truesdale's blind eyes could have bored a hole in Jade's face.

"First, what do you know?"

Jade hesitantly told Truesdale about his paranormal contact with Lave Santos, whom was his only source of information about another man; Stan A. Solve, and a place called Camp Pinto. On his last meeting with Lave, Lave gave instructions on how to get to the camp. And that is where Jade was going. Truesdale laughed evilly, making Jade stiffen. It made many heads in the restaurant turn.

"So you *are* chasing a fairy tale..." Truesdale smirked. "Don't you know? Lave Santos is dead."

"That's what they say."

"No Jade, you don't understand. Let me tell you the whole story. This is about Maxwell Donogan," He said profoundly. "I'm helping him to reach the fulfillment of a particular wish to repent for a crime that

his great, great, Grandfather committed – *And a sin he performed himself when he tried to regain his family's honor. But let me start from the beginning... ”*

Truesdale told Jade about how Maxwell Donogan came down a third-generational line of excruciatingly wealthy men who inherited Donogan Academy from its founder; Maxwell's great, great, Grandfather, whom, apparently did not purchase the school grounds from Santos, but rather, *stole* – by stealing Santos' life.

Although Maxwell Donogan went on to be a highly educated, respected, and wealthy man himself, he was haunted by his past, for in his mind, the luxuriant life he lived was all due to the unnecessary murder of a young, innocent, man.

So he decided to change that.

Using his expertise in engineering, robotics, physics, and other sciences, Maxwell invented a “time machine” which would hopefully enable him to change the past. But “of course” (as Truesdale put it), the machine failed to do what Maxwell intended, though it did lead to another fabulous discovery – of an “entirely new, other world”. That is when Maxwell committed *his* mistakes.

Nobody in the laboratory was brave enough to test the “Dimension Converter”, so Maxwell involved numerous persons without their knowledge or consent; Many were now lost to the “unknown world”, and qualified as missing people. Maxwell was a high suspect that could not be pitted with evidence, for in the simple public's eye, time travel was non-existent.

Regardless, Maxwell now had nothing to say in offense of his Grandfather's crime, for he may have done just the same to a multitude of innocent beings.

Truesdale then explained his part in all of this.

“I was trying to... compromise with Donogan when he told me all of this. Said he'd give me a position at the laboratory if I could help him find Santos' “resting place”; the old man wants to ask forgiveness of the boy, just a spiritual superstition, really. Anyway, I'd heard from Britt you'd been doing a lot of research on the academy's history, so since I know you, I told Donogan I could do it.”

It was Jade's turn to shoot a spearing glance.

“*You don't know me.*”

“That aside,” Truesdale chuckled. “you wouldn't let a poor old man down, eh? All he wants is to pay some respects-”

“Well, where I'm going, I don't think we'll be finding Santos' grave... ”

“At least let me come along to see if your “Camp Pinto” has any missing puzzle pieces to this twisted little history book... Jade Jewel, I really need this job. Tell me you will help me. You’ve always done it for everyone else.”

Jade swallowed hard... If Santos’ directions led them nowhere, he was terrified of what Truesdale might do to him. But even if he refused, the stubborn man would be bound to follow. He could either choose to fear Truesdale, or have faith in Lave Santos...

“Fine, but there are no guarantees that this is going to be easy.”

Truesdale just laughed at him, because he’d just witnessed Jade buy the biggest whopper of a lie he ever told. Maxwell Donogan had promised nothing, he had only heard the stupid story from robotics students when he worked his custodian position in the lab. He’d been thrown out on the streets after illegally using equipment in the laboratory after hours. He damned them for abandoning a potential genius. They didn’t see it that way.

Truesdale was so distraught that his life had gone southerly, that he could not think pragmatically any more. Had to find someone to blame for all this.

Truesdale was here to kill Jade.

Chapter 13

The March of Stan A. Solve

Traveling with Truesdale had become something of a nightmare.

When Jade really thought about it, he could have just made a deal with Truesdale that he'd come back and tell him if he did happen upon Santos' grave, but then again, it would've been Truesdale's fault if he didn't trust Jade's word, so there was honestly no way out in the end.

Truesdale and Jade just weren't on the same page – in ways of being, in the understanding of Lave's story, and in the purpose of going where they were going. Jade was on a mission to possibly save someone's life; Truesdale didn't believe that, so he was content to play victim when Jade ran too fast. It was maddening at times, but Jade could not let it in, for fear he would just call it quits.

In the towns, there were fortune-filled days when people were generous, considerate, and enjoyed what Jade had to offer, but there were also bad days, when what Truesdale didn't offer, got the two chased out, kicked out, or thought untrustworthy. But Jade did not bat an eye – not even when he was hungry. Because he knew, Lave Santos, must be far hungrier.

Buses, subways, biking, and even a ferry ride, Jade followed the directions ordered by the boy who faithed that Jade was coming to get he and his men. However, Jade didn't always know where he was going – Places, street names, environments - they all had changed in the time Lave had been gone from civilization.

Long, dark nights could shake Jade; and Truesdale wasn't much a friend to conspire with.

Sweltering hot Summer noons could pause Jade; whereas they made Truesdale irritated that they were not making progress.

Freezing cold rainstorms tried Jade's strength – but what else could he do but go forward? He could not be convinced of Truesdale's complaining either, for he knew that Lave Santos was far more uncomfortable than they.

Truesdale had a little less composure. He had the audacity to heckle Jade even when Jade was the only reason the blind man could even get around, yet used his absence of vision as an excuse to be lazy and selfish. It was apparent Truesdale's independence had relied on the comforts of the environments he'd memorized – and was sustained under the use of manipulation back when he had people to manipulate... But Truesdale didn't have a Lave Santos to compare himself to, now that Maxwell Donogan let him down, he admired no one.

One evening, slumbered upright, Tsuki in his lap, with his sleeping bag wrapped around his shoulders, Jade was crammed into an abandoned bus stop nodding in and out of sleep... He thought he'd dreamed of a frightful shadow beating against the plastic wall of the bus stop with a gun, but when Jade blinked awake to the sudden, dreadful sound of some sort of trouble, he paused to listen. Within moments, sirens and ambulances came screaming to the scene, a short block away from he and Truesdale's chosen sleeping spot.

Truesdale pretended to wake, snapping at Jade for his next best idea.

Truesdale had missed his chance.

This is dangerous. I'm not safe. I can't do this. All of these phrases knocked on the door of Jade's consciousness, even without the knowledge of Truesdale's goals, but with a tremble in his step, and Tsuki held close, he did not accept those words, because somewhere out there, Lave Santos was feeling far more fear than Jade had ever experienced.

As promised, morning came, and at last, Jade saw a tell-tale sign that his meeting with Santos would crystallize.

Santos had described that Camp Pinto lie in the dunes of a scrub land several miles down the path of a train station that sat at the edge of bay bluffs. There, in front of Jade, was the bay bluffs, and at its' edge, was a rusted, forgotten, building, surrounded by non-operational train tracks – probably not what Lave remembered, but at least the instructions from the “two-hundred year-old ghost” were beginning to bear fruit.

Jade and Truesdale walked beside the water for a few days, camping under the wide sky with the forest's melodies at their backs. It was fortunate Tsuki could hunt for his own food during this period, as Jade could only afford to nibble a burger someone bought him in town, if he were to sustain himself for a few days in the boondocks. Jade suspected Truesdale's fat pack was still bulging with rations from the city, which he ate out of Jade's sight to avoid the subject, but that was okay with Jade; he was starting to like art of survival – and he was going to have to.

Travels down the neglected train track, consumed a week. Jade was eventually forced to fish and eat weeds; sorrel, chickweed, and spiderwort were edible, but not real filling.

Tsuki happily batted at the plentiful grass hoppers, which gave Jade a wide range of other options to consider. After all, Peaches had done it, so why couldn't he?

Each morning, Jade busied himself with washing down by the water. He still had the ability to shave, bathe, and cleanse his one change of clothes, so he always took the opportunity to do so. The gads often skipped breakfast, but sometimes found berries to snack on as they hiked. Jade, with Tsuki's expert help, collected worms and crickets for bait when they decided to take breaks, though Jade's idea of taking a break, was to fish the entire time.

In the afternoon, Jade became aware of the distance; the old, metal tracks went swerving off into the trees, straying from the water's edge. He would want to catch some extra food, and boil water to carry from the bountiful shoreline, before trudging into the unknown.

At night, Jade busied himself with collecting wood, starting a fire, and cooking whatever food he'd painstakingly procured that day. He'd unroll his sleeping bag, pitch it over sturdy branches, and make a tent. He also quickly learned to clean up after supper to avoid being checked in by bold and nosy coyotes. With that, he kept a keener eye on Tsuki's whereabouts. He'd go to bed, tired, questioning the road ahead, but at least he could sleep, knowing he'd done all he could do for the day...

Truesdale missed another chance at murdering Jade when he tripped on Jade's tent in the dark and dropped his gun. Jade came out to see what was the matter and Truesdale had to feign a story until he could find the gun again. Jade unknowingly avoided his death once more.

As Jade labored in the wind and Sun, he finally acknowledged that the days of trading, bustling, and entertaining strangers in town were gone. He still played the violin for he and Tsuki before bed (much to Truesdale's temper), but it certainly was nothing like when he made the people around him dance and smile, clap and sing.

The journey had begun to chip at Jade – He realized he was lonely... He realized he was sad...

But of course, he was sure, Lave, was much sadder.

Sometimes Jade really questioned himself. He often wondered what would have happened if he had just done the things his parents asked of him. Could he have found opportunities after college? Might have he enjoyed going to a big city to take over his parent's company? Might have he had met a girl he was crazy about?

No, he doubted these things, but his loneliness surely entertained them.

As Jade pulled in his third fish, he flopped it into the sand, where the two other's struggling had caught the attention of seagulls. Jade didn't worry too much, since Tsuki was having fun chasing the birds away.

As he started to bait another feeble line, Jade unexpectedly noticed an odd bird out.

It was black, white, and gray, just like the gulls, but it had a completely different form. The lean, bright, avian, with a collar of iridescent turquoise and purple, bobbed around the seaweedy sand of Jade's campsite. With intelligent, amber eyes focused, it pecked at Jade's shoes, which glistened with what sequins were left after their recent, heavy, use.

Curious, Jade abandoned his pole and went for a look. Closer inspection revealed that the pigeon's little pink feet were tasseled by chalky-red leg bands. One included a tubular casket for message carrying.

Jade tried to corner the tame bird to grab it, but it wasn't interested today. It took off in the direction of the forest, soaring above the train tracks he'd be following anyway.

Jade jumped up, packed his bags, kebobbed his fish, called Tsuki, and went after. It was silly to think that he could possibly keep up with what appeared to be a racing pigeon, but Jade had nothing else driving him now.

"Come on Truesdale, we might be close!"

Truesdale groaned and got to his feet. He cocked his gun as soon as Jade's back was turned...

The hilly slopes of the bay-side bluffs plummeted down into a dry, scrubby, dune land of nowhereness... In the dust valley of beach-sand desert, was a long, rectangular house of sun dried brick and log roof; thatched by hand, and worn by weather. Pigeons flew in and out of its' decrepit attic.

Jade wistfully viewed the rickety building from the top of the billowing hill. It didn't look much like a Camp Pinto, but it was possibly a chance to see a friendly face. He took the stride down hill with caution, having to serve as Truesdale's guide along the way.

Upon approaching the front of the aged house, Jade lost his hope that anybody was home here; Broken shutters blocked every window. A solid wood door lie close to the ground, only because the winds had dumped sand on the once tall, porch steps. A historic plaque slowly squeaked on a chain-hung sign as if someone had tried to turn it into a museum halfway through it's life, but the sign's paint was peeled, battered, and unable to be deciphered. However, the embossed plaque actually nailed to the building, still proudly beamed it's title: The Pinto House.

“The Pinto House! Truesdale, this could be it!” Jade excitedly announced. Truesdale thought he was lying until Jade had him feel the embossed plaque. He was right.

The Pinto House. A house, but not a camp. Either way, Jade stepped up to the door and knocked... Only the coos of the startled pigeons resounded. Jade could see their heads poke out of the holes in the roof, as if to say; “Hey! Stop that!”

Jade knocked once more, just to be sure – but as wild as his imagination was, there honestly wasn’t any one else inside.

Jade grabbed the doorknob – which shamelessly fell off.

“Well that certainly won’t do.” Truesdale commented.

It took both Jade and Truesdale to ram open the stuck door, and even then, as Jade pushed it open, the door peeled at its’ frame with a distasteful squeal.

A little tender, Jade, at first, only gave a modest glimpse into the darkness...

Without eyes to discern, Truesdale judged the old house by smell – it was hot, musty, and still rich in the pungency of its’ hand-crafted wood work. He had long since put away the gun – things had gotten interesting.

Tsuki’s concernless dart into the deserted home finally quelled some of Jade’s hesitance. Tsuki went kicking up the dust bunnies as he raced after the abundant roaches and mice. Jade stepped in, the wood floor keeled under his weight, but his eyes were on the cabin walls...

Paintings, newspaper articles, medals, and framed black and white photos hung in tribute of the long, lost, forgotten past. Taxidermed deer heads, hunting equipment, and even a few old leather goods littered the ancient living room.

“What do you see?” Truesdale followed hastily.

Jade described the cozy, old-fashioned interior of the living space. There was an old divan, wood trunks, a hand-spun rug on the creaking, panel floor. Metal pails sat in corners, vainly catching rainwater from select rips in the ceiling. A small table displayed an antique rotary phone, much like the ones Jade used to see in Godwin’s office. He detailed the images on the wall, and read some of the newspaper clippings aloud.

Jade then went to the second door in the house; this one opened up into a tiny hall of three more doors. The door on the right led to a kitchen.

Dust layered the wood-burning stove, a dining table, a few chairs, a primitive ice box, and a porch door which allowed one to step outside to attend the ax block and fire-pit.

Back in the three-way hall, Jade opened the left door, where they entered a bedroom, complete with a bed frame cradling a hay-stuffed mattress, and goose feather pillow. A writing desk and chair was positioned at a window, over-looking the vast dunes. There was a 1900s wooden-handled shotgun sitting on a wall mount beside a multitude of black and white, or sepia photographs of natural settings. The night stand presented a well-read bible, a leather-bound journal, and a porcelain oil lamp.

Jade couldn't help but flip through the pages of the cracked-skin diary, he expected to find beautiful, fancy, hand writing slithering down each and every paper, but instead what he saw, was choppy, ink-splattered, hand-printed words that may or may not make sense on a given page. Whomever the journal belonged to, they did not learn to read and write until later in life.

Jade stuffed the small journal into his jacket pocket and proceeded to the last door in the three-way hall. It was not only jammed shut, but locked – though this wasn't much a problem since the wood rotted at the frame.

Again, it took both Jade and Truesdale to pry it open, but as they pulled the door aside, the two leapt back at the sight of a humanoid figure cascading from the closet – the helmet, trench coat, gloves, boots, canes, and umbrellas spilled to the floor, but remained lifeless, except for a couple of mice who went skittering to safety.

Jade let a breath go, telling Truesdale what it all was before cleaning up the mess and forcing it back into the closet. The rest of the walk-in closet was chock full of hung coats, an orderly shoe rack, and many stacks of gun, lamp, and emergency supply. Jade noted to take advantage of some of it if it was not expired - Wondering if the entire closet was stocked inside-out, Jade parted the coats to find a face staring back at him.

Jade shrieked, causing Truesdale to jump back, but just as soon, Jade clapped a palm over his own mouth and laughed himself to tears. The face was his – it was only a mirror.

Having had enough spooks for the day, and with sunset encroaching, the two went back outside to set up camp.

Making use of the rusted fire-ring, Jade roasted his fish over a full, hardwood fire. Sleeping bags were rolled out under the clear, star-spangled sky, and Jade and Truesdale discussed what they had found.

The writings on the walls of the Pinto house spoke of great wars between several lands. The wars and places Jade, nor Truesdale had ever even heard of. Pictures consisted of everything from buildings, nature, animals, and portraits.

The people looked of nobility, the backgrounds were like castles from movie scenes. Jade wondered if anyone in the photos was the lost Lave Santos, or mysterious Stan A. Solve, but there was really no way to tell, and the newspaper clippings mentioned no such people – only a cryptic family by the last name of Renkins, and an oddly addressed concept called “Moon Medusa”.

Although the surface of the enigma had barely been scratched, Jade began to succumb to his exhaustion and fell asleep mid-conversation after Truesdale had lapsed into pensive silence.

Truesdale hated the name “Renkins” as it reminded him of a rival his Father had at work years ago. He remembered spending a bitter October afternoon having to listen to his Father grovel about the detested man.

Lost in thought, Truesdale suddenly realized he knew exactly where his own rival was – to his left and fast asleep...

Truesdale lay in contemplation... He'd come so far just to succeed in his dark deed, but now he was too curious about the mystery before him to call it quits... He thought about retrieving the pistol from beneath his extra roll of sleeping bag, but before he could make the choice, he too, fell fast asleep.

Jade woke to a soft pop on the cheek.

“Gross Tsuki...” Jade hissed at the cat who dropped the dead mouse on his face as a gift. The campfire was still glowing enough for Jade to see that Truesdale was completely out. Dawn was no where near.

Annoyed, Jade shooed Tsuki and brushed the mouse away. He sighed and rolled over, suddenly getting poked by the journal that was still in his pocket – he'd utterly forgotten it.

Now that he was awake, Jade excitedly opened it to see what other clues it had to offer.

The journal was a complicated read due to the writer's bad spelling and slang. From the topics of interest, and the way it flowed, Jade deducted that it was written by a young person, perhaps mature for their age, but not well educated in English. He could not at first tell if the owner was male or female until it mentioned a “special” her, and on the very next turn of the pages, a small photo of a girl fell out, on the back, written, “I love you, Kristelle”.

The girl was strikingly beautiful, but her just barely smiling face was gut-rackingly painful to meditate upon... She was deeply hurt despite her flawless surface.

The narration wandered into discussion of the Moon Medusa, but it was hard to follow who and what was up with whatever “they” or “it”, stood for. It was the last few pages that held the most tangible of prepositions...

It was challanging too put up the looking glass tooday, and but hope fully I shall nott brake it on my jaaunt back to camp pinto. I soon must return for Mission Medallion is through... I failed and perhaps my hiding here is being much too a coward... I can't find the courage to try again, to fight again... But maybe somehow if Lave Santos or any of the others are still alive, I may find the power to believe again... But for now it is just me and my lonely magic mirrors...

-Stan A. Solve

Jade slipped out of his sleeping bag and stepped into his shoes. He took up an oil lamp to make his way through the dark. Tsuki jumped on his back as he went back into the house. His weight made the wood floor chirp all the way into the little hall, where he opened the closet door...

It took almost fifteen minutes to remove all of the crowding items from the Pinto house's special mirror, but once the closet was clear, Jade could access the dusty looking glass.

Just as he suspected, the mirror had a secret – it came right off the wall to discover a stark, cold, concrete hall...

Water droplets echoed in the hollow distance.

Rats squeaked in horror of the lamp light.

Jade lowered himself onto the stony walk, shining the light down the insentient, humming, bunker hall. Dozens of "doorways" stared back.

It was an endless maze of doors, hung with large, filthy mirrors, which repeated the sight of the damp, stained, concrete, hall into infinity.

Jade's heart grew faster, but his breath, slower. Tsuki meowed at his sudden fear, reminding him he was not alone. Jade swallowed and fisted the dog tag around his neck.

Terrified, he pushed forward.

He kept going even though he had zero proof that Lave Santos was, *really, truly*, waiting for him at the end.

He had nothing to see in order to believe, but looking back at his short, chaotic, life, he had never had proof that he would become the outstandingly brave young man he became in this moment, either..

The boy he had been, didn't know Stan A. Solve existed. He just believed. And that's exactly what he was going to do now.

Lave was waiting for Stan.

"I am Stan A. Solve."

Thank You

A big thank you to my family for supporting me, and allowing me to cultivate not just my imagination, but my “Real World” as well.

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