

The Superhero's Closet

The novel you've downloaded is about extraordinary humans with everyday problems. Retired superheroes, villains with vengeance on their minds, teenage girls as wise as Confucius, young men with mother complexes, and a superhero underground just down the block from you. There are plenty of exploding cars and contests of might, in case you're wondering.

It's my homage to the mythology of everyone from Superman to Adam Warlock. There are no pictures and no moving images. This book stems from a love of words, their power to inspire color in the imagination.

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. *The Superhero's Closet* is my love letter to people who dig comic-book superheroes, whether they know lots or know nothing. It's for people who love human drama, and have a thirst for tragedy.

Please share this book with as many people as it is legally possible for you to do so. I'm generous with my rights, as the next three pages plainly explain (but not in the rain).



H. Andrew Lynch

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Superhero's
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PART ONE

Magical Beings

Chapter 1

“Laurisha, I can’t do this.”

Lain clutched the straps of his backpack. It was full of scribbled notes, phone numbers, vague leads. He’d brought with him even his diary, in which he’d recorded dreams of tempest waves, and of a woman, radiant like overbright fields of flax, and of her awful plunge into a deafening surf. This woman, Lain was certain, had to be his mother. His real mother. Her name came to him in these dreams, but it echoed in his ear, unheard fully, like a staff note struck by musicians in a deep well across town. He’d understood only her pleas, twanging with regret, as she withered in mid-air on her way to the ocean below.

Lain’s best friend, Laurisha, stood on the sidewalk next to him. At sixteen, she had a host of weary-old-lady tools at her disposal: the pulmonary puffing of her soft brown cheeks was proof his indecision irked her.

“Lain,” she said. “We just drove ninety miles to do this. What do you mean you *can’t*?”

Behind them, her father’s limousine hummed. Its wide driver leaned against the passenger door, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette.

Lain stared up at the monolithic face of a government building in downtown Sacramento, California’s capital. Greek letters were carved on the crowns of its high fascist columns, but the only words he understood were on a bronze plaque: California Department of Records.

“This is pointless,” he said. He knew it wouldn’t be enough for Laurisha.

“Fine,” she said, channeling mother guilt. “Danny?”

The limo driver stamped out his cigarette and opened the door for her. She stuck one leg in the back, her chin hovering over the car roof. “Let’s go, Lain,” she said. “I’ve got homework to do.”



“I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Sha.” Lain sat next to her in the back of the limo as Danny headed home for San Francisco. She fiddled with a cracked fingernail. “I mean, I want to know who my birth mother is, but—”

“But you can’t handle the truth.”

“Yeah, I can.”

“Can’t.”

“Yes, I can. I think.”

“You don’t know, Lain. Good thing it’s a beautiful day or I’d make you pay for gas. What a waste of time.”

He made a hurt face, then reached for his backpack. He smashed it against his lap and pulled out a beaten file folder full of ragged sheets of paper. “My mom gave this to me,” he said, then looked confused. “I mean, Joan, my adopted—”

“I know who you mean.” She looked at the folder in his hand as if she might crack another nail if she touched it. “We’ve been through that folder a thousand times. It’s weak. What we needed was to talk to some blue-haired record keepers in Sacramento, Lain. You’re never going to get anywhere with ghostly old notes that survived a fire in your parents’ first house.”

He opened his mouth, but she waved an adorned finger between them. “I may be sixteen, but I know from records. As my father would say, ‘if they’re not completely false, they’re full of the truth.’”

Lain leaned back in plush leather, letting the folder and its useless contents slide into the backpack.

Laurisha muttered below her breath, “I’ve never seen such a lazy obsession.”

She was right. How many months ago had he decided to strike out and discover his birth mother? Had it been that long since his sixteenth birthday, since dreams of the lethal tides began? Had his parents—Joan and Allen—been patient with his crabbiness for all those months?

He supposed the quest coincided with the morning he told himself in the shower that he was gay. Proudly, defiantly, he’d whispered into a shaving mirror, “I’m probably not a heterosexual kind of guy.” But who could tell? His boyfriend, Tony, couldn’t. Laurisha didn’t have answers. And then, of course, there was the Troll.

Being sixteen sucked.



“Hold on, kids!” Danny shouted. Lain and Laurisha clawed their leather seats as Danny swung the limo across three lanes of traffic. They were on the Bay Bridge, five hundred feet above water. Danny apparently had spotted something other drivers were only now noticing. He was a hundred yards ahead of the curve when brakes started slamming and cars started piling up.

“Fuuuhhck,” Lain cried, burying his head between his knees. When he looked up, a bright orange explosion in the sky over Yerba Buena Island shook the bridge. Danny slowed, waited for the reverberations to subside.

“Who the hell is that?” Laurisha said, pushing Lain away. She scrambled to the window.

They entered the tunnel between bridge spans before she got a really good glimpse of the conflict in the sky.

Halfway through the tunnel, she started poking Danny's shoulder, but his shrug said it all. A mile of traffic sat paralyzed before them. They weren't going anywhere for a while.

“Oooooooooohh!” she grunted. “I hate super-villains.”

Lain nodded, but super-people duking it out in the air overhead was one of those things that, like acne, you fussed over or learned to live with.

Louder in his mind than honking horns and explosions in the sky was the blast of sea waves, and the sobs of his mother as they dashed her.

Chapter 2

Lain pointed a key at the back lock, but the door swung open before he reached it.

“Lain!” His mother stood in the doorway. She studied him as if he might be an imposter, someone doubling as her son.

“Hi, Mom.” He slipped around her, not wanting to touch her, and dropped the keys by the toaster. He removed his backpack and took a deep breath.

“So?” she said. She stepped up behind him, but didn’t touch him, not the way she used to. When he turned, he tried to see her with new eyes, the eyes of a boy whose mother was now afraid of him.

“No luck,” he lied. He withdrew the battered folder his mother had given him months earlier, and extended it toward her.

Her shoulders fell, although he didn’t think she was aware of it. Tentatively, she took the folder from his hand and held it against her chest.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I wish we had the original records. I wish we knew more than we know.”

He raised a hand. “No worries, Mom. Maybe I’m just not supposed to know.”

She stepped forward. Her red curls and freckles, her slit of a mouth, were in direct contrast to Lain’s wavy blonde hair, bright green eyes, and pouty lips. She had never been very good at smiling, although she tried hard to generate one now. The net effect was Lucille Ball looking kind of shift.

She extended a hand toward him, but he recoiled.

“Mom,” he said. “I don’t—”

He didn’t want to hurt her the way he’d hurt her three months ago. It had been the second time he’d exhibited what his doctor was calling a “high likelihood of supernormal capacity.” It came out in small sparks from his fingertips. The light. The small, clumsy beams of energy. High likelihood? Whatever. He was a leaker.

“Lain,” she said, and gripped his forearm before he could pull it away. He was two heads taller and strong, the way high school swim stars are supposed to be strong. He could have pulled away, but he didn’t. It made him tremble when she touched him, and he hated that more than anything in the world.

She tossed the folder onto the counter behind him and placed her other hand on his neck. It was almost too much to bear, but he so badly needed to be touched by his mom, the mom he remembered, the one who doted on him and encouraged everything he did.

She wrapped her arms around him. It wasn’t a classic Joan Grey hug. It was a trial hug, without muscle or heart behind it. But he understood. He’d shocked her. And he hadn’t even told her he was gay.

Joan stepped away, batting at her eyelids with the backs of her hands. “Your father and I are going to this adoptive-parents-with-curious-teenagers group, right?”

He nodded as she continued. “They say that the best thing you can do is support your child’s curiosity about his birth parents with nothing but truth and love.” She looked at the folder. “I’m sorry the truth is so slim. The fire wiped out so much, Lain. It really broke our hearts. It’s been ten years, but we lost nearly everything.”

Joan and Allen had adopted him two days after he was born. He’d known for most of his life that he’d been adopted and it had never been a problem. His dad had always said that in San Francisco, you could be the son of a two-headed superhero and an activist Ken doll and nobody would bat an eye. He had been right. But that didn’t change the fact that fires and bureaucratic incompetence over the years had wiped out all traces of his birth mother. His natural father? Whatever. That was like finding a hot spot on the sun.

In Joan and Allen’s pathetic little folder were clippings of their adoption announcements, a charred and illegible birth certificate, and several adoption papers, but none of the ones that mattered. The agency from which they had adopted Lain had closed three years after he was born, its records absorbed by a state agency that years of budgetary bloating and contracting had splintered and made useless.

From the damaged birth certificate, he knew one thing. His real mother had been an Irish citizen. Her real name had not been known; rather, the author of the certificate had elected not to supply it. Joan and Allen knew absolutely nothing about her.

Everything else he knew about his birth mother, he learned in dreams. He imagined he knew her name, where she had lived before landing—of all improbable and sad places—in Sacramento. Her face was hazy in his imagination. He sculpted it from careful studies of his own face in the mirror. She might have been green-eyed. She might have had full lips. She may have

been tall and strong and a champion swimmer with blond locks. Or she may have been a rude hag. He'd never know.

"So, what's next?" his mother said.

He shrugged, wanting to be away from this house.

"Well—" she said, wringing her hands and staring at the refrigerator. "Laurisha is coming over for dinner, right?" Before he could answer, she tugged open the refrigerator. "I'll make a ham. Thursday's are good ham days." She made a light-bulb-going-off-in-her-head sound and said, "You're not going to fall behind because you missed school today, are you?"

"No, I'm on it." Given his honor roll status, she pursued the matter no further. "But," he added, "if you don't mind, I'm going over to a friend's for a little while."

"Laurisha?" she asked. Her butt faced him as she rummaged through the fridge's vegetable drawer.

"No," he said, and started moving quickly toward the kitchen door.

"You're going to see that boy, aren't you?" He looked over his shoulder at her. She held a withering cob of shucked corn in one hand and the refrigerator-door handle in the other. He recognized this face. It was the new, suspicious Joan, the woman who had screamed, "What *are* you?" the day he'd sent a current through her body that hospitalized her for four days.

"No," he lied. "I'm not going to see Tony, if that's what you're in a huff about."

"I don't like it when you speak to me that way."

He slapped his wide hands against his thighs. "Why are you so worried about where I go?"

"I'm not worried about where you go. I'm worried about you."

He spread his palms toward her. She narrowed her eyes at them, the hands that had harmed her. "You worried I'm going to hurt someone?" he said, his voice louder than he'd intended.

She shook her head and tossed the sad corn cob onto the counter. "No," she said. "I'm worried that someone—" she pressed one hand against her quivering lips. "—I'm worried that someone might hurt you."

He didn't understand at first, but then his gut contracted. Could she tell he was gay? Did she know what was up between him and his eighteen-year-old "friend?" He opened his mouth to argue, but it was too much, too many things not being said that two people once as close as Joan and Lain should have been able to just talk about.

For the briefest of moments, he thought he saw in her face the concern of a woman who understood Trolls.

Without looking at her, he grabbed the keys to his hand-me-down car and said, "I won't be long. I'll be home for dinner."



Lain wound down the curvy roads that led from Corona Heights in central San Francisco to the Castro neighborhood. He crossed Market and made a left on 18th Street. As he passed through the Castro, with its crowd of pharmacies, bars, so-so restaurants, trinket boutiques, coffee shops, and gyms, he felt like he was at home, the way that tent hands felt at home outside the limelight of a circus. Tent hands were intimate with how things worked, but far removed from the rings in which clown legions, tigers, flying Wallendas, and acrobats performed for applause.

He was at once fascinated and repelled by the showmanship of the standard Castro homo. He preferred, sometimes with disbelief and wonder, to sit in the rafters and watch them perform.

When he reached Noe Street, he turned right, pulled up the hill about half a block, and parked in clear view of the intersection. He was still a mile from Tony's house, but he had to stop here. It had become a ritual since that night nine months ago when he met the Troll.

When Lain was a little boy, Maurice Sendak's cuddly, stubbly-faced troll had fascinated him. Until nine months ago, whenever he'd heard the word "troll," he associated it with those wonderful illustrations. Now, after meeting the Troll nine months ago, right here at this intersection, Sendak's warm images and all the tender boy frights they evoked were distorted beyond recognition. He would never again hear that strange old Norse word without thinking of pain and bleeding.

He wasn't sure why he came to this spot once or twice a week, trying, like an obsessed vampire hunter, to stake out the monster. Was it to study the beast in its urban habitat? To watch how it hunched against the day, lurking in the impossibly slim space behind a phone stall or mailbox, waiting for small children to pass by?

He hadn't seen the Troll since that night last winter, but he was always on the lookout for him. What would he do if he spotted the creature? Aim crossbow and let loose with a flaming arrow? Run down the street screaming Latin invectives, dodging 7-Eleven patrons, brandishing a holy sword to cut off the vile monster's appendage, the very same with which it had lured Lain?

He wiped sweat off his upper lip and slunk down in his seat. The beast might spot him; if he spotted a former victim, he might forever vanish in some Castro fissure, shuffling through city sewers. He'd squeeze himself out of a drain across town, find some other boy to haunt.

Lain closed his eyes.

He didn't know what had drawn him to the Castro that evening. Boys and girls his age whom he'd seen holding hands and acting "out?" Maybe. A bit of jealousy tinted with intense curiosity. Whatever it was, he hadn't known what to expect. At only fifteen, he'd been a virgin, but he'd known what was up. How could he live in San Francisco and not understand sex in *all* its forms?

He didn't have a big head, but he suspected he was cute enough to probably attract someone interested in—in what? More than anything, he'd wanted to talk with someone like him. Just another gay fifteen-year-old schmo skulking around trying to get into the circus.

The Troll that night had chosen as his human guise a worn movie star, the kind of guy with coifed stubble and constellations in his eyes. Around him swirled a bedroomy darkness that turned Lain on the moment they met outside the gay bar next to 7-Eleven. After an eternity of awkwardness, the Troll bought them two watered-down Cola Slurpees. They stood on the corner for nearly an hour while the Troll politely listened to Lain prattle about school, swim team, and his quest for his real mother. The older man never said much; he could acknowledge a remark with the knotting of his gorgeous forehead, or prompt Lain to continue with only a thrust of his lips.

They went to the Troll's car and made out in the back seat. It was all kissing and groping at first, and Lain was having a nervous ball. But when the Troll's fingers went places and he pressed harder and harder against Lain's backside, Lain felt the movie star glamour fade. What replaced it was howling pain.

Maurice Sendak would not have approved.

Lain sat up in the seat of his car and turned on the engine. He barely stopped at the intersection before tearing down 18th Street, toward his boyfriend's house.

A man at the corner watched Lain's car roar down the street. He stepped back against the white wall of the 7-Eleven and faded into the painted brick.

Today, he had not been seen. Today, he would not be held accountable. Evasion and elusion are the Troll's tools.

Chapter 3

“Mrs. Wall,” Lain gasped. He’d run up three flights of crummy stairs.

“Lain!” Tony’s mom cried, tripping over her bathrobe as she stepped away from the door. “Come in, come in, come in.” She grabbed his hand and tugged. He vaulted forward like a rag doll. “Tony’s downstairs in the cottage, making the perfect dildo, one with a nuclear warhead.” Because she didn’t seem to find her own remark terribly funny, Lain refrained from laughing.

She led him through a museum hall of junk, most of it prized ornaments her son had made. A full-sized suit of medieval armor gleamed beneath a flickering track light. Across the hall from it was a field of mirrors, each adjusted so that the armor’s reflection created the illusion of an army assembling in the corridor.

“Come on, come on, come on,” Mrs. Wall crowed, and tugged him into the kitchen. “Fuck.” She let go of his hand and bounded past the butcher block to fan a burnt meat object hissing in a skillet on the stove. “He’s downstairs, Lain. Tell him I murdered his dinner. With love.”

He tossed open the kitchen door and raced down the fire stairs to the garden out back. There, peeping from a goliath thicket of sage bush sat the cottage—Tony’s lab. On a sign over the door read “Radiation Suit Highly Recommended.”

He was impervious only because he knew better, so he flung open the door and skidded to a stop in front of the exoskeleton. This time, the exoskeleton had a jointed penis.

“What do you think of it?”

That voice, hoarse and melodic, like a thirteen-year-old boy about to discover his “guy” voice, only Tony was eighteen and this was the voice he’d have forever. He stood at his work table in the cottage’s far corner in a pair of tight black Levis, a black t-shirt with “Suck your own” splashed across it, and, of course, no shoes.

Lain pretended to review the penis. “What do I think of it?” He couldn’t answer the question, not at least until he’d had a chance to stand there awkwardly, like he always did, and gawk at what Laurisha called “boyfriend beauty.” It made Tony’s coke-bottle spectacles, his endless eyelashes, the Frodo fur on his toes, all part of some terrific plan to smite Lain.

He finally paid attention to the exoskeleton and its penis. The latter consisted of three separate tubes connected by vacuum-cleaner hose. He heard Tony toggle a switch. The penis began to pivot on multiple axes. It seemed kind of pointless, but Lain stared in disbelief, as if it were the most cunning thing he’d ever seen.

“Your mother,” Lain said, “says it has a nuclear head.”

Tony shook his head, irritated. He tore a pair of headphones from around his neck and tossed them at a graveyard for computer mother boards. He crossed the room. Lain held very still, hoping his boyfriend would stop and kiss him, but Tony didn’t. He was wrapped up in something he’d call “big.” It was so typical.

Tony stopped at the exoskeleton. He reviewed it as if reviewing a farm animal he was about to buy. He whacked its angular bum and then adjusted the collar that sat below an empty space reserved for the human head.

“Mother doesn’t understand the difference between containment and dispersal,” he said, more to himself than to Lain. He reached down and grabbed the mechanical cock, twisting it so that it gyrated upward instead of toward the floor. “Bombs are devices of dispersal. This—” he said, nearly breathless with his own insight, “—this is an object meant to contain beauty, not to fuck it up.”

Lain looked down at his feet. “You can’t contain beauty, can you?” When he looked back up, Tony was staring at him.

“Yes, Lain, yes, I can.” His olive skin, never spoiled by sun and never sallow, glowed in the cottage’s ambient yellow light. “Wanna see how?” he said. His grin sparkled.

Lain nodded. “You and Princess Gadget discovered something, eh?”

Tony nodded, stuffing his hands in his jeans. “She rocks. If I liked girlies, I’d track her down.”

“She’s a boy,” Lain said.

“Says you.”

“Says Channel 4. She was on the news last night . . .”

“I know. I saw that piece of shite.” Tony carefully unscrewed the penis from the exoskeleton. He looked up at the empty space where a head would have been and said, lovingly, “Don’t move.” He then sat at one of two opposing computer workstations.

“. . . they said they have proof she’s got dick.”

“Ha!” Tony cried. “On the internet, it doesn’t matter what she’s got. Come here. Let me show you what the Princess taught me today.”

“How often do you talk to her?”

“We’ve never actually talked. It’s all through chat and email.”

Lain leaned over Tony’s shoulder. “Let me see,” he said, impatiently.

“Look,” Tony said, stabbing the Enter key with his index finger. A program launched instantly. Lain missed the name of the program, but assumed it was Tony’s 3-D modeling application.

“Here,” Tony said. He pointed to the monitor, where red polygons flashed on a digital display of the exoskeleton. The tiny facsimile sported Lain’s head. “And here,” he continued, pressing Shift-F5. The red polygons blinked off, replaced by pulsing blue sparks at the fingertips and around Lain’s digitized head.

Lain was pretty sure he was looking at an image of the points where he was most likely to emit energy. The blue sparks showed the places where he leaked.

Lain didn’t know what to say: thanks for designing a skin that prevents me from frying my mom?

“You see?” Tony said, standing and gesturing at the monitor. “I *can* contain beauty. Princess Gadget is a fucking rock star. Damn, you like?”

Tony sat down and wheeled on his chair across the small room. He started smashing keys at the other workstation, the one he called Two Fat Ladies.

Lain sat in another chair and rocked back and forth, observing in silence this boy he’d fallen in love with.

“Look at my bugs,” Tony had said about a month after they’d met. It was Lain’s second time to the Wall apartment, and three months before Tony had completed the wiring in his cottage. Tony had opened a drawer in his bedroom, grinning like a harlequin. He stared as Lain peered at the monsters beneath the glass. “The beetle is the ultimate model for experimentation with exoskeletons,” Tony had said. “Their architecture spawned the astronaut’s space suit. For thousands of years, they steered military fashion, inspiring the shield, the breastplate, the . . .”

Fine fur covered each dead beetle. Their pincers were horrible because they made you think of things that could snap a man in half. Some of them were black, but many twinkled emerald and rouge when you turned them in the light.

“Kiss me,” Lain said, sliding his chair over next to Tony’s.

“No,” so matter of fact it infuriated Lain.

“Why not?”

“Because you want me to.”

“You’re a fucker.”

“Bet you don’t talk like that in front of Joan and Allen.”

“They kiss me.”

“Not the way I do.”

Tony took off his glasses. He leaned forward, rolled his chair next to Lain’s, and wrapped his arms around Lain’s waist, awkwardly at first. Tony often took

time to thaw, to come down from strange, sexless heights illuminated by codes and calculus. When it happened, Lain felt safe, a beauty not dispersed, but contained, where he could be looked at and loved. He didn't know why touching Tony failed to evoke the dread he felt when he thought about touching his mother. Maybe it was because he hadn't hurt Tony. Yet.

They drew from each other all those things one wants to give away in a paralyzing kiss.

"Ow!" Lain cried. He backed out of Tony's lap, sucking on his lower lip. "That hurt."

Tony shook his head. "No, it didn't." He twirled in his seat and tapped the Enter key on Two Fat Ladies' keyboard. "Ready to see what the Princess did for our cause, today?"

Lain, rubbing his lip, nodded petulantly.

Since the disastrous incident with the Troll, the details of which he'd shared only with Tony, he'd fantasized about sex with his boyfriend, but was too afraid to share those fantasies. That night nine months ago was so strong in his memory, the stinging, the blood in his underpants, freaking out because he thought he'd die and didn't know who to tell. The possibility that Tony might hurt him was too strong a deterrent. Tony didn't seem to mind that they'd never had sex in the six months they'd known each other. So Lain accepted their simple life of heavy petting as the way things were. In the absence of affection with Joan, he was happy to have someone he could hold.

Tony moused over a desktop icon and double-clicked it.

"Check this out," he said. The computer's drives hummed as a pane sprang up on the monitor. It displayed a much richer model of the exoskeleton Lain had seen moments ago on the other computer. This one, glistening with real-world texture, appeared to be a small human waiting for Tony to tell it what to do.

"The problem," Tony said, "is that we—and I mean the human race—just don't know enough about what makes someone a leaker or a flyer, let alone really smart or stupid. If you look here—" he stroked keys and a familiar image appeared, partially transparent, over the pane containing the liquid skin.

A bell by the door dinged loudly three times. "You're dinner is ready," Lain said. "She figured out how to revive that pork chop."

"Yeah, whatever. My first subject—the most important one," he said, pointing at the screen, "was kind of a dead end. Gill Man's been around for decades—he was fighting for justice before our parents were born. He's the real deal, the original superhero. And because he's worked in so many government capacities, I thought I might find data on his powers and how they work through Freedom of Information Act channels. But no go. He's been an overt weapon in lots of American struggles overseas—his files, if you can find them, are impenetrable."

Lain leaned closer. Before him was a rotating image, holographic in texture, of a man in his thirties. He wore green tights, a loose-fitting, American Revolution shirt untied at the neck, and a massive yellow cape onto which had been stitched thousands of golden sequins. He'd been handsome in that wholesome, enamel-glinting way. But this image was of Gill Man around the time of World War II. The poor guy was in his eighties, now.

Tony stroked the keys. "He'd have been perfect, because his body performs, in effect, precisely the opposite way your body does. His physiology is about containment—redirection, really—while yours is about dispersal."

He looked at Lain's hands. "—If the episodes you've described are any proof."

Lain made fists and bunched them in his pockets.

"That," Tony said, turning back to the keyboard, "is where Princess Gadget comes in. She couldn't provide any information about Gill Man, but she's got loads of shit on Vernon Hood. He's no Gill Man, but his body's peculiar functions have fed a lot of the modeling."

Vernon Hood. The public knew him as Strongarm, America's crime-fighting darling.

The local hero's image replaced Gill Man's. Even in this diminutive digital state, he was an impressive man.

Nothing could harm Strongarm. And many had tried. Bulletproof, fireproof, concussion proof. He'd even fallen to the ground after being thrown by Blacque Macintosh from the 40th floor of San Francisco's TransAmerica Building. Circling TV choppers had captured it all, their footage inspiring endless copycat scenes in the movies. Landing like a bomb, Strongarm piled through concrete, steel pipes, yards of telecom cable. He'd sent up a cloud of shrapnel so thick it wounded three dozen onlookers and shattered windows up and down the block. Some of Lain's schoolmates thought that had been the coolest thing Strongarm had ever done. They'd banded together to write an email asking him to do it again.

"I don't get it," Lain said.

"Strongarm and you have something in common," Tony sighed. "You're both human bombs that require some shielding. His bio-chemical composition is his exoskeleton. Its qualities make something along the lines of a naturally generated force field. Enhances his strength, too, since his flesh and muscles can withstand far greater torque before tearing."

"I'm not a bomb," Lain said. "I won't explode."

Tony stopped talking and paid attention to what he was saying. "No," he said, "you won't explode. I don't *think* you'll explode. We don't even know if you're ticking. But I've seen what people like you are capable of. I'm just worried about you. Am I allowed to worry about you?"

Lain shrugged, then nodded.

He was thinking about Tony's reference to "people like you."



“I’m home!” Lain yelled, instantly wishing he could just go upstairs and study for tomorrow’s algebra test.

Laurisha tore around the corner. “Yo, boiee, whattup?”

Lain was tired. “Hey, Sha, is dinner ready?”

Joan appeared smiling right behind Laurisha. “Ready? Can’t you smell it?”

“Yeah,” he said, lazily. “Meatloaf.”

Joan looked hurt. “No. Roast chicken!”

“Uh-huh.”

Laurisha folded her arms and sneered at Lain. “Where I come from, roast chicken is a feast for kings.” She cleared her throat. “And queens.”

“Great!” Lain cried, snapping out of his fugue. “Laurisha, come to my room, I wanna show you something.” She giggled and ran past him up the stairs. “We’ll be right down, Mrs. Grey,” she said. “Smells great!”

They left Joan looking puzzled in the hallway downstairs.

Lain slammed closed his door. Laurisha had tossed herself onto his bed.

“Don’t fucking *do* that,” he said.

“What?”

“Slip fag stuff into conversations with Joan and Allen.”

“What do you mean?” She bounced onto her stomach and flipped open the Avengers comic book lying on his pillow. Her black boots clubbed the air as she swung her feet back and forth over her butt. She looked over her shoulder and grinned.

“Never mind,” he said, tsking. “God, I can’t—I mean—why is it like this?”

He started pacing at the foot of the bed.

Slowly, tracking his every move with wary eyes, she closed the comic and sat up. “What’s wrong, Grey boy?”

He stopped pacing and turned to her, face tucked up in frustration.

“Laurisha,” he said, “Do you think I’m special?” A pathetic little sound from his throat followed the question. At first, he thought he’d startled his best friend, but then realized she was holding back laughter.

“What?” he said, smiling feebly.

Laurisha placed a rigid forefinger against her lower lip. “Let’s see,” she said. “You’re a homosexual superteenager who still can’t drive a stick. Which part of ‘special’ were you hoping to cover?”

“I’m serious.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Ugh. You sound like Tony.”

“Dark and mysterious, you mean?” She cleared her throat and drew her shoulders together, mocking Tony’s slender-boy slouch. “Lain, if you attach the atomic coagulator to the molecular procrastinator, we’ll—”

Lain planted his fists on his hips, causing Laurisha to fall against the mattress chortling. “Oh, no,” she said. “When I said ‘queen,’ I *couldn't* have been on the money.”

Lain sank to the floor, legs twined Indian-style.

“Why couldn't I be more like you?” he said, pouting.

“More like me?” She pretended to muse. “You want to be a rich black bitch?”

“Sure, why not? Your future is guaranteed.”

She stood abruptly. “Whatever. Dinner is ready, I can smell it.”

In the two years they'd known each other, Lain had found in Laurisha a devoted ally: part girlfriend, part confessor, with a razor-sharp view of the world and little tolerance for its nonsense. She wasn't at all like her father, Marcus, a man who had learned to temper his opinions in his role as public relations consultant. Instead, she was living proof that her mother, who'd died when Laurisha was nine, had been a critical inspiration. Laurisha had once said, “Everyday, for nine years, she was the first person I saw when I woke up and the last, smiling face I saw before I went to bed.” Lain had seen hundreds of photos of the woman. In the basement of the Green's palatial home in Pacific Heights, they'd watched videos of Sha's fifth and sixth birthday parties. The resemblance between ma and Sha depressed Lain. He'd often wished he could sit in front of the TV and pop in a video of *his* birth mother. Or flip through old photos of the woman when she was hiking, or swimming, or just in love.

Chapter 4

“Carolina!” Vernon yelled. He stood on a wooden deck in the middle of the half-acre backyard of their home in Walnut Creek, twenty-five miles from San Francisco. Before him sat an enormous Weber grill. He stared into it, holding tongs in one of his ham-sized fists.

His raven-haired wife swept out of the back door, a large tray of ribs and chops in each arm. Her blue dress was snug around her breasts, swirling away from her thighs. Her dangling toes hovered an inch or two above the ground as she floated toward Vernon, dodging their son Cole’s Huffy bike.

The enormous yard sloped toward a row of Cypress trees. A few yards from the lawn’s edge was a heated, kidney-shaped pool. In it, their twelve-year-old daughter Verolina splashed, trying to get the attention of her younger brother. Cort was trying to read a comic book in the skimpy shade of a very young redwood, a gift from the heirs of the mad lumber baron Vernon had brought to justice ten years earlier. Vernon had watched his son grow as attached to that skinny little tree as other ten-year-old boys grew attached to pet dogs. Or to their Vernon Hood action figures.

Carolina lifted a knee and floated over the deck’s edge. She landed a few feet from her husband; then laid her platters on one of the pine benches that sat on either side of Vernon’s pride and joy, the monster Weber.

Vernon snorted at his grill. “Help,” he winced, brow curling in deference to his wife.

She grabbed the tongs and a bottle of lighter fluid, tipping the latter over the coals.

Cort set the comic book down. Verolina stopped splashing and swam to the pool’s edge, pulling herself out with a small, graceful leap. Cort stood on the concrete beside her; they looked at each other with those faces kids adopt when they know their parents are about to do something unexpected and excellent.

Carolina winked at Cort, who preceded his sister on their way up the hill, and then squirted the bottle. She set it down quickly and picked up a pack of wood matches. Still holding the tongs, she withdrew a match, flicked it, and tossed it into the grill.

Vernon frowned at Carolina, who now stood over the monster Weber, poking at flaming coals with her tongs.

“Okay, you win,” Vernon said, wrapping an arm around Carolina’s waist. He kissed her cheek, allowing his full lips to linger on and around her temple. Her stoking of the fire slowed as she fell into Vernon’s moment. While her rapt kids looked on, amazed at how high she’d flamed the Weber, she passed the tongs to her husband.

“Oh, my God,” Verolina squealed. She grabbed her brother’s arm. He yanked it away as Vernon turned to see what the fuss was about.

Verolina pointed at the plastic bottle of lighter fluid. It fell off the deck’s railing and bounced into the blazing charcoals.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Carolina squawked. Whipping the tongs toward the bottle, she tried to bat it out of the fire. The container was already curdling.

Vernon pushed her away, knowing she wouldn’t stumble. Instead, she skated back, sailing off the edge of the deck and landing in front of her children, arms outstretched to protect them.

The bottle’s explosion was nowhere near as neat as a car blowing up in the movies, but its muted “whoof” and the fifteen-foot flash of flame that followed delighted the kids. They watched their father’s t-shirt disintegrate, twirling away on gusts of heat.

“Nice one, Dad!” Verolina giggled.

“Vernon?” Carolina called calmly. She raced back to the deck, steering clear of the fire lapping over the edges of the metal bowl. When Vernon turned toward her, her eyes widened. She put a hand over her mouth to stifle laughter, reaching out with the other to pat away the smoke curling from his chest hair. Vernon was unharmed, but his expression was on the hunt for someone to blame. “Sorry,” she said. “You said you wanted help.”

“In the future, use a flame-thrower,” he said. “Wanna be more careful next time?”

A car pulled into the driveway. The first of their guests.

“Go take a shower,” Carolina said, irritated with his thanklessness. “You look like a minstrel.”

Wide white eyes and white teeth set in a blackened face gawked at him from a platter’s reflection. Marcus, their public relations guru, would have frowned.

“Cort,” Vernon said. “*You’re* in charge of the grill until I get back, k?”

Cort was kicking a stick around. He ignored his father.

Vernon frowned as he looked to Carolina for support. She had that “He’s your son” look as she adjusted the coals in the grill.

“Cort?” No response. It had been this way between father and son for weeks, now. Vernon’s cheeks burned. He turned his back to the sun, clouding Cort with his bulk. “Cort, I’m talking to you. Will you help your mother take care of the grill?”

“Yup,” Cort said, without looking up. His body twisted forward. He took the tongs from Carolina and poked listlessly at the coals. Vernon watched him for several seconds before heading into the house. As the screen door snapped behind him, he heard car doors slam shut in the driveway out front. The first guests had arrived.

On his way up the stairs, he stopped at one of the many photos lining the stairwell wall. It was a photo of him, Carolina, and the kids. Olan Mills, all velvety backdrop and flattering lighting, taken last year, when Cort was nine. The bright, compact package of glee that beamed in this photo was not the boy Vernon had just asked to take charge of the grill. He knew kids aged. Hell, Verolina had changed a lot in the last year, but she had seemed to increase, to become magnified. Her sense of fairness and charity was a clear sign of how successfully she and her mother had bonded.

Where were the signs of Cort and Vernon’s bond? The boy shied away from anyone’s touch, poked at his food, and kept to himself for hours at a time. His grades were decent, and he excelled in science. His teachers swore he was social and thoughtful. They looked at Vernon strangely when he probed for signs that his son might be . . .

A picture of his mother hung next to a picture of his dad. They were both dead. His mother had been a manic depressive, a fact he’d discovered—by accident and much to his dad’s horror—years after his mother killed herself.

Did these things run in the family? Had Vernon passed the wrong set of genes on to his son?

Not all that long ago, Cort had been a chatty, curious kid. But that had changed over the last few months. Had it been a whole year? Carolina, when she chose to talk about it, told him to stop worrying. This—chronic introversion was just a phase. But Vernon was a worrier. He didn’t know how he’d gotten that way. Maybe it was years of saving children from abusive environments. Maybe seeing kids who didn’t have it as good as Cort made him worry that they were raising the boy the wrong way.

Stepping into the shower, he tried to remember what it was like to be ten years old. He’d lived in Highland Park, a suburb of Chicago, with his dad, general manager of the Oscar Mayer plant in the city. His mother had been dead for five years.

Back then, he still got bruises and cuts, even broke an arm sailing off a swing set. The good old days of human frailty. He remembered being larger than other boys, and never a terribly good student, but he played with an urgency the other kids found inspiring. He was often the commander or captain,

the chief and the prince, ruler of alien empires, scourge of the forces of darkness. Those were righteous ten-year-old days.

After showering, he pulled on a Speedo, a pair of shorts, and a ruby-red t-shirt, and then stood before the mirror on the bedroom closet's door.

At thirty-seven, he was a perfect physical specimen. But he tried to look past the bulk of muscle, past his wide, round face and quizzical eyebrows, to the man inside. He looked like his father, but shared little of that south side bohunk's Spartan mien. He widened his eyes and grinned, inspecting his perfect white teeth. His mother was somewhere in there, but she'd never gotten out.

"Dad?"

He spun around. The sight of his daughter standing in the doorway released every tension in his body.

Verolina tipped her head to one side, as if she understood that something she didn't understand was going on. Twelve-year-old girls didn't get much prettier.

"Mom told me to tell you Cort needs help with the grill. She said the meat-eaters have arrived."

Rubbing his face, he smiled. "Come here," he said.

She crossed the room as if walking a high-fashion runway. He crouched and she fell, giggling, into his arms. With the natural perfume of his beloved daughter in his nose, he was impervious to everything.

He could handle a few dozen carnivores.



About thirty people had arrived since he'd gone up to shower. Most of them were from the isolated Walnut Creek neighborhood below Mt. Diablo, where they'd chosen to make their home. One unexpected guest was Cort's fifth-grade science teacher, Baxter Whipple, who showed up without his wife. Rumors flourished about Baxter and his wife. She had gone overseas several months ago on an exchange-teaching assignment, but the word was out that she had left Baxter.

Whipple's dates today were a couple of industry friends from his former life as a high-tech executive. They were bland men with wheat-colored hair and off-white Oxford shirts, identical tan khakis, and penny loafers. Aging Silicon Valley yuppies who had achieved notoriety a few years back when they turned their considerable business skills to the world of elementary school education.

Vernon wouldn't have admitted he liked any of them all that well, save Baxter, but he appreciated what they'd done with their wealth: namely, the dramatic improvement of technology and science facilities for schools in Contra Costa county. For that, he was happy to grill them meat.

Carolina sneaked up from behind. “While you were in the shower,” she muttered, purling her arm through his, “Marcus called to say he had a small emergency. He won’t make it.”

Marcus Green was their star publicist. His “small emergencies” were most people’s catastrophes. He wondered what was going on at Marcus’ offices in San Francisco.

Carolina focused her cobalt blue eyes on his. She saw the decision he was wrestling with. She pressed closer, smiling for the benefit of their guests.

“Take care of your guests,” she said. “Call Marcus later. He sounded worried on the message, but if it couldn’t wait, he would have said so. And help your son with the grill before he starts stabbing Sensi and her brats with the tongs.”

She moved away from him, winking as he revved up to say something witty in response. But he was too slow; he hadn’t done a terribly good job of making her laugh lately.

Vernon felt a whisper on his back, like a loose shirt falling into place. He turned to find that Baxter Whipple had just slapped him on the back. On either side of Whipple was one of his Silicon Valley cronies, their grins as wide and vacant as he’d remembered them. Vernon always found it odd that Baxter never acknowledged these men, as if they were supplicants who simply carried the train of his robe.

“Mr. Whipple,” Vernon said, preferring the formal with his children’s teachers.

“Ah, you should feel free to call me Baxter,” Whipple said. He nodded knowingly at the man on his right and then the man on his left. “When I’m old and gray, we’ll consider the ‘mister’ business, yes?”

Whipple had an annoying way of turning a perfectly ordinary statement into a question to which you were never sure you were supposed to respond. His son’s teacher was in his late forties, with a long, narrow frame that seemed otherwise devoid of definition, like a plank on which someone had hung nicely pressed cotton. With his lager-colored hair flat and close like a military officer’s, he cut a middle-American figure of the entrepreneurial teacher: good with kids, capable around parents, concerned enough to warrant respect, brilliant with technological concepts, and wealthy and powerful, quite probably the closest thing Whipple came to having an edge.

“Of course,” Vernon replied, refusing to complete his sentence with “Baxter.” “How are you?” he reached. He never knew what to say to men as smart as Whipple, although public life had exposed him to hundreds of them. In Vernon’s favor was his reputation and fame, which usually intimidated others and leveled the social field, but with Whipple, there was a smug assuredness that end-ran around Vernon’s shield of celebrity, leaving him, if not defenseless, then at least feeling defensive. All those years of board-room facilitation had made a master manipulator of Whipple.

"I'm doing great. Hungry as a horse. The market's been good to me and my students are at the peak of the grade-recognition curve. Right. And how are you? Still steering clear of 'Strongarm?'"

"Well," Vernon said, surprised. "No, not really. I'll always be Strongarm. I've got new priorities these days. The kids, you know." He cleared his throat to mask discomfort. He and Carolina had retired their crime-fighting mantles years ago. To raise . . .

"Kids," Whipple said. He studied Vernon carefully, without even looking at him. "They change everything, don't they? Well, not to worry, you don't look out of shape. In any case, what's inside is more important."

Vernon stood up straighter and slicked back his hair to conceal his irritation. The two Oxford shirts flanking Whipple headed off in opposite directions, toward separate clusters of children they either taught or knew through community programs.

Vernon fished for something else he and Whipple could talk about. "Cort is doing remarkably well in your class." He chuckled, shook his head. "Wife and I are a little worried that his love of the sciences is getting in the way of his other studies. But, well, Carolina says I shouldn't worry."

Baxter blinked, an even, practiced smile crossing his face in the span of a fly's life. "Your wife's a wise one. Everyone says so."

Vernon thought he heard a veiled dig at his intelligence, but didn't let it show.

Whipple stepped forward. He was as tall as Vernon, but a fraction of his bulk. He placed a skinny hand on Vernon's shoulder and leaned forward. His thin lips, the same color as the rest of his slightly waxy face, parted inches from Vernon's ear. "I have to admit something," he said. Vernon tensed. "Cort is a very special boy. I've talked with his other teachers. We all think he has gifts."

Vernon leaned away from the science teacher. Gifts?

"Ah, nothing as overt as a superpower." He chuckled, but the sound came out in slow motion. "No, we think Cort might be something of a genius. He's got a way of distilling from scientific abstractions and concrete truisms something of the order of nature."

Vernon nibbled his lower lip. He didn't understand.

Whipple continued. "Now, I don't normally like to heap prodigal praise on ten-year-old boys, but Cort's got that special 'it.' My colleagues and I agree."

"But his grades in other classes . . ."

Whipple flicked a waxy hand at the air. "You've got to trust us, Vernon. Ask any of his other teachers. We're all in agreement. The boy needs space. He's got to be allowed to develop on a natural path. In his case, that path is one of science. He gets physics, he tosses around chemistry principles like they were airplanes he'd folded from scrap paper. He's *good*."

“But he never talks about science.” Vernon wanted to understand how genius is born.

“They usually don’t. You’ll notice a growing shyness. That’s normal with kids whose brains are developing strong logical centers, great capacities for retention, method, and reason. It all rounds out in the end. He was probably an effusive, ebullient boy only a few years ago, and is now probably withdrawing a bit, pensive and unresponsive. We see it all the time. My advice to you—and talk to others, *please*—is to let him ride through it. It’s like first love. He’s smitten, not quite sure what to do, but deeply aware of his capacity for commingling, if you get what I mean.”

Again, one of those barely perceptible little pressures. That was Whipple, winking as he planted an elbow in the wall of muscle over Vernon’s ribs.

Vernon studied the teacher’s face. He wished Carolina were here, to interpret. There was something flashy and subversive about the way Whipple talked, but that was probably just Vernon’s lack of understanding. The man was brilliant. He was a philanthropist. He’d discovered in their son a capacity for genius that infused Vernon with pride. A smart son. A really smart son. Not a bruiser. Not a superhuman, but a genuinely nice, brilliant boy. Flushed with a sudden sadness because he couldn’t pick up the phone and call his dad to say, “Pop, your grandkid’s a genius,” he instead smiled widely at Baxter Whipple and patted him delicately on the back. Anything firmer would have snapped the teacher’s spine.

“Let’s eat,” he said, and took Whipple’s slender elbow in his large hand. Together, they crossed the lawn, beaming in mid-afternoon sunlight.

“Cort!” Whipple said, sitting tenderly on the edge of a bench a few feet from the monster Weber. “Nice to see you, son.”

“Nice to see you, too, Mr. Whipple.”

Vernon watched his son with new eyes. This handsome boy, with his brown curly hair swept forward, like some kind of olive-skinned urchin from an old painting, was the Hood family genius. Vernon was swept with an unreasonable sense of patronage. Tending to steaks on a common grill? That was for other boys. He took the tongs from Cort, tossed on several more slabs of steak and burger patties, and called to the yard at large for more meat eating. “What’ll you have, Baxter?” he said, feeling at once comfortable using the first name of the steward of his son’s scientific mind.

Whipple looked away from his student, smiling at Vernon. “Steak, well done, please.” He returned his gaze to Cort.

“Your father tells me you haven’t been sharing with him the magnitude of your successes in class. Did you tell him about the upcoming Fair, and your entry in it?”

Cort shook his head without saying a word. He looked up at his father, a mountain above him. Cort had his mother’s eyes. Made, it seemed of dark blue

glass that shone like phosphor when the sun struck them. Cort had spent so much time over the last few weeks staring at the ground, avoiding people's eyes, that when he looked up at Whipple, still and resolute, he seemed to be looking straight through the man, finding on the far side of him one of the precious dream worlds he'd once ranted about when Vernon was trying to concentrate on the morning paper.

"Your steak will be several minutes, Baxter." He snatched a pair of sunglasses from his back pocket. Before he slid them on, he noticed Carolina watching him from a clutch of neighbors down by the pool. She had slipped out of her blue dress and now wore only a one-piece bathing suit, black, with orange trim. She was larger than most women, with the proportions one would expect of a goddess who with a single stomp could crush concrete, or with a single delicate fanning of her hands, part the harshest brush.

He tugged his t-shirt over his head, ripping it. He dropped his sunglasses on the heap of stretched cotton and pulled off his shorts, revealing a Speedo made for Titans.

He grabbed the tongs and then looked back and forth between Cort and Whipple. "Here," he said, putting the teacher in charge of the grill.

Vernon stormed down the hill, weaving with unexpected grace through clusters of guests. Ten feet from the edge of the pool, he slouched forward and jumped, drawing his knees to his chest and clasping them as he rolled slowly in the air. His shadow threw a group of kids in darkness for an everlasting summer moment, drawing gasps through their gaping mouths. When he landed, a wall of chlorinated water drenched everyone standing on the far side. The water level had dropped two feet by the time he surfaced.

He glanced back up the hill, smiling and waving to the applause of neighbors and friends.

"Catch me, Daddy!" Verolina threw herself as if leaping from the Golden Gate Bridge. She had nothing to fear. She would never hit the water, not with her father there to catch her. He reached out, timing the motion and direction of his upturned palm with the arrival of her spinning tummy. They made contact; he lowered her quickly to the water as if she had soared from a tree like a white-winged bird of prey, skating across the waves in slow motion.

Vernon then surprised his daughter by pushing up, firmly enough to cause her to shriek with delight. He watched a blur of black and orange cross his field of vision. He swung around, felt Verolina's tummy leave his palm.

Carolina stopped at the diving end of the pool, arms outstretched. Verolina was an incoming missile, arms flailing, her laughter and screaming so intense that a couple of women on the lawn cried out in apprehension.

Carolina caught her daughter with a well-practiced spin that diffused the intensity of Verolina's flight. A moment later, she set her daughter, dizzy and beaming, on the ground beside her.

Verolina broke the moment of excited silence that followed. She stroked her hair away from her tanned face, shouting, “Do it again, Daddy, do it again!”

Twelve-year-old girls didn’t get much prettier.

In the next several minutes, guests who had brought bathing suits strode down the hill, their meals finished, and sat at the edge of the pool, splashing their legs in the water. They watched a storm of children descend on Vernon. The kids wanted to play cannonball, tidal wave, Marco Polo, throw-little-Jimmy-Meeks. As the little army closed on Vernon, he stretched his neck, looking for Cort.

At the top of the hill, he saw a small figure enter the house, the screen door whapping shut behind him.

Chapter 5

Geoff closed his book and tipped his head back to nap. The crush of city sounds interfered with his need to sleep, and no arrangement of pillows over his head would shut them out. In his prime, when bad guys carried colossal purple guns, he relied on the solitude of his mountain retreat in the Sierras to get away from the buzz of public duty. But later came the incessant meetings and events and stay-overs in the Lincoln Bedroom, the U.N. ceremonies, the ambassadors' spouses, and "Li'l Snipper," the dog-food dog. Ergh, the dog.

Never a moment's peace, never a sliver of silence into which he could slip and not be seen, or heard, or remembered.

But they remembered him. Even the really young ones, with their primetime t-shirts and loud, uncaring mouths. He was the first superhero. Scratch that, the *original* superhero.

In this day of brightly-colored superfreaks, it was a chore remembering just to be an old man. Christ, who needed the grief, anymore? Original, sure, because he'd sewed sequins on a pair of tights and turned the first wife's living room drapes into a cape . . . and then taken flight, straight down Main Street, U.S.A., while the grandfathers of today's heroes gawked up at him in all their 9-year-old, blank-eyed awe. Original because, in a way, he designed the rules of superheroism. Without really knowing it.

Damn his ego, and damn those sequins.

When he had the mountain retreat, before it burned, he would lie back across his mother's Empire chaise longue and nap against a world. They'd never known where to find him, which just added to his mystery. When he emerged, usually during one catastrophe or another, they hailed him as the triumphant savior-king come again. Lost three wives to it all, and his kids . . . Julie and Monica, all of them, lost them to his career.

But, oh, how the public had adored him. He watched the new ones, the garish ones with Hollywood egos and rock-star manners. Kids loved them, but

it wasn't adoration the way their grandparents had adored Gill Man. Some of his equally old peers, some feeble, most dead, had faded from the limelight, or had watched their limelight turn to late-late-latenight TV, laugh tracks and all. But Geoff remained ever shiny, like Abe Lincoln on a new penny. He was the original superhero, after all.

So fuck rock stars.

"eh!"

Geoff tipped forward, knocking the book from his lap. Despite terrible kinks in his lower back, the book never made it to the floor. "Damn, damn, damn!" he muttered. His hand quivered as he placed the book on the table next to the window. He groped at a bottle of Proxacillin, spilling two pills into his palm. The pills helped, but truth was whore-frank these days: he—Gill Man—was an old man, eighty-four and ticking. It *hurt* when he fell down and he *didn't* appreciate it when kids spoke before they were spoken to.

Geoff washed down the medicine with a glass of water. Beyond the window, a bus conked to a halt at the curb, discharging trash, scooping up trash.

"Oh, Geoffrey Gillman, what have you turned into?" He shook his head, watched the bus continue unloading passengers.

Barely before it hunkered away, beaten, dented, and lethargic, the bus let go of an adorable girl. Her name was Amy and she wasn't trash. Hell, no one else on that bus had been trash, either.

It was just what he saw, because of who he had become. The angry old man, tired when he went to bed, twice as tired when he woke up. He saw some filthy thing to complain about in every move his fellows made. They thought that made him "cantankerous with wisdom," but he knew it just made him the Norman Mailer of great but outdated superheroes. Mailer wasn't who he'd wanted to grow up to be.

Amy Church. Ten years old. Cantankerous with wisdom.

He walked to the front window to watch her routine.

Today, because it was Wednesday, she looked both ways four times and then crossed the street. At the corner, she entered Kurz Market, from which she emerged seven minutes later with two small plastic bags, celery stalks poking out of one of them. She huffed to keep the packed bags close to her skinny legs. One glance up Berthold Street, one glance down the winding incline of Tower Street, a breath, a brief shake of blond hair out of her eyes.

Amy was the last person to fly on Geoff's shoulders. She'd been seven, the shy and meticulous little grown-up that belonged to his downstairs neighbors, Gercy and Bruce. He did it for her birthday. She'd been in love with him ever since. For a while, particularly during her dreadful bout of pneumonia, the only name she called was Geoff's. Asking for a ride.

"When can we fly again?"

At the curb, Amy looked both ways three times and then stepped into the street. The grocery bags bobbed at her knees, slowing her down.

That's when the celery fell out of the bag.

Geoff pressed his fingertips against the window pane. He watched Amy twirling in surprise and uncertainty over the celery.

She looked both ways, but only once, and up the wrong street.

Good Christ!

Geoff shoved open the window. "Amy! Amy, get out of the road!" He heard other windows open, other versions of his command, none of which met their mark.

His chest seized as a tour bus soared down the Tower-Street incline, roaring around a blind spot below the train tracks.

In Amy's excitement, she dropped both bags. Limes, apples, two dry sausages, and a jar of white sauce spilled from one bag, rolling in every direction. The contents of the other bag shattered on impact. Amy stood paralyzed and started bawling.

Thirty years ago, Geoff would have thrown himself through the window and sailed to Amy's rescue. But these were dimmer days, when old men were intimate with their bones, and worried about falling down.

"Look!" a neighbor's guest cried as Geoff hauled ass down the hallway, "Isn't that . . ."

But he was already two floors down, on the street. He whizzed past Gercy, past the Waid twins, around the Busiek boy, through a clutch of barbers, and just missed crushing the foot of Solomon Wong, the local jewel thief.

The bus driver was woefully out of touch with his weapon. His face as the bus crossed Berthold was one of a man in a flaming fighter plane.

Thirty years ago, Geoff could have handled this on his own. A rampant bus with a dazed little girl in its path would have been his fireman-with-cat-in-tree. But these were hazier days, when an old man and his neighbor, Sally, with whom he'd shared unrequited love for half a century, could count only on each other's ointments. His math had always been good, and he had a good heart for neighbors. Together, these two qualities made up his mind for him.

He stooped in the middle of Berthold and drew in what seemed like his very last breath.

"Saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaalllyyyyyyyyyy!"

He heaved as her name came out; fell to his knees. The pavement quaked as the bus bore down, forty feet from clobbering him.

The front doors of Geoff's apartment building flew across the street, followed by the unmistakable girth of the neighborhood's last spinster. Sally's breasts preceded her by a mile. They rocked, it was quite possible they propelled her. But it was good enough for Geoff. He didn't have to worry about Amy, now. With Sally on the case, that girl was protected.

He could focus on the weapon.

His pajamas twisted uncomfortably as he turned, toes, knees and one hand crushing pavement for traction. This would probably hurt tomorrow, but it was better than Marv's broken hip.

One lifted hand met the oncoming bus. The impact was like a bus hitting the side of another bus, with one important difference. Geoff's hand stopped the bus dead on contact, absorbing and instantly dissipating every stream of force that resulted. The shock was ruthless on his arthritis. In one second, the driver and his 18 passengers experienced a moment of coming to a rude stop. An old gal, one eye, croaked, "Get offa me!" when a spindly woman named Lucy bumped her shoulder. And that was the extent of their impact.

Geoff, his clenched fist white hot with bus grill, fell clumsily to the street. He banged his head on a chip of concrete and walloped the hell out of his shoulder, but he'd live.

The bus driver stumbled out of his bus, shoved by a wave of equally perplexed patrons. They milled, some screamed, others cursed to high hell. But they all stopped to look down at the old man trembling under the bus' front bumper, and the fat old lady cradling a girl one tenth her size, trying to contain her agony at the foot of a trash barrel.



"Is that Gill Man?"

"I don't know. Looks like my grandfather, when he was alive."

"Steal a look at his chart."

"Cretman will have my ass. I'll ask her later."

"There's a pool says it's Gill Man. The boys in ER say he stopped a speeding bus with his bare hand."

"Hand?"

"Yeah, just one. Can you imagine that?"

"Can Strongarm do that? Stop a bus with one hand?"

"Don't know. He stopped a plane from taking off at SFO, but he destroyed fifty feet of tarmac and ripped off the underbelly of the plane in the process."

"Ruffian!"

"Not like Gill Man. He was a stud. Subtle, too. All that disperse and dissipate stuff. Billy understands how his power works, but I just like the green cape."

"He hasn't worn that since I was a little girl. Reminds me of my grandmother's living-room curtains. She expired a year after grandpa died."

"Uh-huh. You working tonight?"

"You bet. ER says he's under sedation, not too badly damaged, mild concussion, knocked a socket at the shoulder blade, blood pressure off the

scale; they had to bandage his bloody fingertips, cuts and the like. He's fragile, that one. Kind of scary, a little sad. Seems like he's been around forever. I wanna clean his bedpan. Maybe get an autograph."

"Toss you for the shift."

"You got a quarter? I'll take heads."

"Whoa, look at that. Looks like I get duty tonight. I'll get two autographs."

"Oh, Billy will love you for that."

"Well, I was thinking about one for me and one for Daphne. She works in radiology, sees a lot of superheroes. She got me three autographs last year, from some of the leakers government is all freaked about."

"Public menace, leakers. Sure, the good ones do good things, and everything, but they *are* full of isotopes, or ions. Whatever. I'll give you fifty bucks for a Gill Man autograph."

"Fifty?"

"Uh, yeah. Billy really loves the old heroes. I got him a Battleship Betty, from Stonewood Mall, a couple of years before she passed. She was beautiful with her sweepy white hair, and so nice. Kind of loud, but they said that was because she'd gone hard-of a couple of years earlier."

"You don't have to give me any money. I'll try to get three autographs. I love your boy. Wish my Glen would stop smoking pot long enough to appreciate a good old-fashioned superhero. He's into rock stars. Skinny as weasels and about as interesting as—"

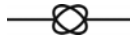
"Oh, my God, is that—"

"I'll be damned. It's the Madonna. Quick, look busy."

"I am busy."

"Doing what?"

"Scheming another autograph for my Billy."



Geoff drifted into a chair beside the bed in which his body lay sleeping. A gentle whistling escaped the nostrils of the old man in the bed. An IV carrying unknown fluids hung from the sheets, coiling toward the bag on a pole behind the chair in which Geoffrey sat. He wouldn't have said he was bald, but he looked fairly damn near it, several white curls springing from a space far back on his pate. His skin sagged around the mouth, his lips, once strong and straight, were soft and indistinguishable from the spotty cracks that charted on his lower face a historical map of everything he'd ever said.

Whiffs of bleach and detergent filled his nostrils. It was like Sally's bathroom, but with bed linens.

He looked down at his gnarled hand, the one he'd shown to the tour bus only hours earlier. It was browner than the other one, tanned by the flash of

kinetic energy he'd tossed off into the invisible places between reality and everything beyond it.

Amy's older sister, Kathleen, had trotted out some atomistic hypothesis to explain how his power worked. Governments with millions of dollars worth of research and brain trust behind them had done much more. But no one knew. All that time spent trying to figure out how things worked. What did it matter when the truth was that it just worked? Like a Christian's miracle or a number-one hit single—the truth was that it just worked. And had for seventy years.

He looked up from his hand and saw a different man in the hospital bed. Back in the forties, when Geoff and Battleship Betty were bigger than Bob Hope, they had called him Catatonic. Cat in close quarters. Cat had been only a few years younger than Geoff, but with a full head of white hair in his final days. More beautiful, in the way that saints are held to be resplendent at the hour of their final spiritual change.

"Equilibrium," Cat had once said to him. They had been walking through a theme park in Illinois, twenty-four years ago. "Equilibrium and contention," he'd said. "Do you know the difference between potential energy and kinetic energy?"

"No," Geoff mouthed, suddenly conscious of the parched hospital-room air around him. A nurse stuck her head in the room, but withdrew without a word. This was Geoff and Cat's time. She had nothing to offer as meaningful as the reunion of two ancient friends.

Cat had smiled. "Then, let me explain it to you. Promise you won't tell Betty," he said.

Geoff nodded at the curious amber monitor over his bed.

"I'll put it in terms you can understand. Potential energy is everything you do to prepare for a devastatingly important first date." He'd tucked his chin into his chest, chuckling softly. "Kinetic energy is the date."

Build up and release—Cat's words—Geoff had recited them to himself every day for over two decades. For different reasons, but with no less conviction. Build up and release.

Geoff leaned closer to the still shape nestled in sheets on the bed.

Cat's dry lips parted only enough to reveal the decay of disuse. With skin like French mill soap, he was still dauntingly beautiful, a male paragon stripped by time of his strength, charm, and intelligence.

Oh, Cat, where have you gone?

Geoff sat back and sighed. His body sank, lungs bored from trying so hard for so long.

"I am the equilibrium and the contention," Cat had said. "You think I've lost my mind and am now associating with my messiah complex. No . . . would that it were true. It's more mundane than that. I've received the responsibility; I'm intimate with the mantle." He'd sighed, shoulders stooped in resignation.

Geoff grabbed each arm of the chair and hauled himself up. The curious amber monitor flickered, went black, and then he was staring up at it, alone and afloat in a linen closet of nice-smelling sheets and blankets.

“eh!”

His eyes drooped, the needle in his arm wriggled when he moved, just an inch, to oust a cramp in his bottom. Sleep, blessed sleep, no city sounds.

“Geoffrey?”

The hospital door slammed open. Light, like hellish lightning, caused him to draw a pillow over his face. “eh!” he cried.

Sally tumbled into the room, two orderlies behind her like silly girls trying to keep pace with their popular and unpredictable leader.

Sally wore a dress large enough to cover a tree house. It twirled around her roundness. She grabbed at its unstoppable twisterness when she laid eyes on him.

“Hell on earth!” she cried. She turned to the closest orderly. In the hallway, three nurses, one holding a pad of paper and a pen, gawked as if they had started working there that very day.

“I want to speak to the surgeon general in charge!” Sally said.

“Miss Madonna,” the orderly replied, but Sally planted her fists in the general vicinity of her hips and shook her head, chortling. “You don’t get it, boy. I said, ‘*in charge*,’ and that’s not you. Go, before I huff. You’ve seen my puff.” She cradled her breasts with two sausage-fat hands and leaned into the doorway, shoving orderlies and nurses back into the dimly lit hallway. “Watch the girl and her parents. The little one likes Kit-Kats and Snickers bars. Don’t ask them any questions. Don’t tell them to wait in reception. If they want to be close, put them in chairs right outside this room.”

She slammed the door in an open-mouthed orderly’s face.

“Christ in a Sno-cone,” she said. For the next several seconds, she surveyed the room.

Geoff watched her over a fold in his pillow. He was afraid to look too hard, for fear she’d notice he was there. He felt safe now, and terribly embarrassed.

It took only a minute for Sally to calm down. She alighted from her righteous rage and breathed deeply. “Geoff, you’re going to kill me one of these days. Are you okay? I’d have been here earlier but every reporter on the west coast is on the street out front. They were bad in the sixties, foul-smelling in the seventies. Twenty years hasn’t improved them one bit. Babies! Little kids with microphones. Christ in a freezer bin!”

Her soft face, so round and smart, was like an emotional gun sight, aimed and ready to fire her rather formidable ordnance. In old age, she’d gotten better at calming down, at least in private. She was still a juggernaut in public—she had, so she said, a fearsome reputation to uphold. As Battleship Betty’s

onetime sidekick, Sally had learned enough about female forthrightness to fuel a century of feminism.

“My heart can’t take this, Geoff. They tried to roll me into ER. They said I might have contusions I wouldn’t notice for days. I said, ‘I’m fat, I know, but I know when I have a contusion. Go away.’ I mean, Amy is all right and everything, but you can’t be yelling from the street for the heroic efforts of a woman who hasn’t seen action in thirty years. I’m a big girl, but I break easily. Look at this bruise, for Christ’s sake?”

She lifted a meaty arm and pointed at a spot on her arm he couldn’t focus on before she lowered it.

“Treating you well?” she said, sniffing at the disinfected air.

He shrugged, pressing the pillow away from his face.

“How’s the food?”

“Fine.” Tears welled in his eyes. “Thank you for coming when I called. Thank you for coming. Thank you.”

“Ah, Geoff.” Her face flushed and tears started running freely. “You saved a little girl’s life today.”

He nodded through the sobs. “How’s Amy?”

“She’s with her parents. They came down with me. They’re really worried. Amy’s eyes have been as big as Betty silver dollars for two hours. I’d have brought her in, but a butch doctor forbade it. I just barely got through the door. No wisecracks.”

“Did you talk to the reporters?” Geoff asked. He felt far more doped than he’d realized. The room was a little yellowish. Wasn’t sure whether it was the paint job or the painkillers.

“I’ll give them the what for, don’t you worry.”

“If you don’t mind,” came a voice from the doorway, “I can more than deal with the press.”

Dr. Welling, Geoff’s physician for twenty years, stepped into the room. In his calming presence, even Sally deferred.

Welling, many believed, had a low-key superpower—retarded aging. He looked no different now than he did when Geoff first conscripted him, at the suggestion of a friend in Washington, D.C., back in 1980. No one was really sure how old he was.

“Geoff,” he began.

Geoff raised the pillow over the lower half of his face. “Don’t lecture me, Max,” he said, barely comprehensible through the polyester stuffing.

“I won’t. You’re a good man and you did the right thing. Amy Church might be dead if it weren’t for your bravery. We can do this one of two ways.” He cocked a leg against the edge of the bed. “I can go out and give the official medical report: you’ll live, copy-worthy details and the like. Or I can do a Gill Man spiel.”

The pillow fell to the floor when Geoff tugged it away from his face. Sally picked it up and propped it behind his head.

“No spiels!” he said, trying to find his breath. “I’m finished. I don’t need the attention. Max, you know me better than that. I don’t live that way anymore. You—”

“I stand reproached.” Dr. Welling spun away from the bed, his handsome face darkening. “You haven’t been to see me lately, Geoffrey.”

Sally looked back and forth between the two as if watching a debate.

Welling turned to the bed. “Is the Prozacillin helping?”

“It helps,” Geoff said. “I move around without all the burning in my joints.”

“Good. I have one piece of advice. Lay low and enjoy these years. This may sound a bit damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t, but if this happens again, I can’t guarantee your body can survive it. Frankly, I’m stunned that you didn’t come away with more serious injuries. You are not a superhero, anymore. You can’t take it. Do I make myself clear?” He directed this last question to Sally, who nodded, shuttering her eyes gravely.

Like a scolded child who refused to admit his folly, Geoff met his doctor’s eyes with aggrieved obedience. These were delicate days when old men followed doctor’s orders. Or else.

“How do I look?” Welling said, adjusting his tie.

“Proper enough, I suppose,” Sally said. “Give them hell for me, okay?”

At the door, he stopped, his back turned to them. “Shall I send in the girl?”

Geoff looked to Sally for an answer. After a moment, she shook her head. “Not just yet. We’d like to spend some time alone.”

Dr. Welling smiled at Geoff, who in that instant hated his undying physician for grasping so well how failing humans worked.

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