

This novel is a work of fiction.

The resemblance of characters to any persons, living or dead, was more than likely intentional and should be taken in stride because, in the end, you've been immortalized in fiction. Granted, it wasn't like you were some Dickensian Hero who will live forever in the hearts of a million readers or something, but it's also not like you had Mark Twain eviscerating you across the printed page. If you think you're in this book remember that it's just a story and at least I didn't give the world your full name that they could develop some fandom-based hate-cult against your non-fictional persona and burn your real-life house down.

So, yeah, if these characters bear a resemblance to you, just be cool about the fact that your potential and, legally speaking, largely unidentifiable likeness has been entered into the annals of middling sci-fi/fantasy which, you have to admit, is at least kinda neat. And, now you've got that going for you. Which is nice.

This story is dedicated to everyone who ever put on a cape or a mask and decided to pretend.

This story is also dedicated to my first and, quite possibly, only fan. Thanks for getting my back all these years. This is as much yours as it is mine.

On with the show.

Nothing was special about the group of friends now lying on the street covered in black ooze. At least, they didn't think anything was special about them beyond the fact that they continued to remain friends despite their obvious social differences. That was sort of a taboo subject, though. They all ran in different circles but, in the end, they were all part of their own separate circle. Sounds shallow, right? Let's move on.

Justin was the first to sit up after the pressurized explosion of this black substance knocked them down. Taking off his glasses, he saw a blurry representation of the accident scene. A minute ago, a white late-80s hatchback slammed into the side of a turning tanker truck causing it to blow all its seals and erupt into a wave of the black sludge which now covered him from head to toe.

His girlfriend Char was still on the ground. Glasses or no, he knew that it was her. She was standing directly behind him when the blast hit and was perfectly positioned to take the least of the blast. Most of her was clean. She was covered from her knees down with a few splotches on her face.

Their other friends were represented by raised lumps in the black sludge layer now covering the outside of their favorite bar. It appeared that Char was the only one coming out of this without the need to throw away all of her clothes.

Justin had seen everything happen in that slow motion sort of way that seems to happen when something very bad is about to happen. He knew what was going to happen and, while he could have screamed "Run!" or "Get down!" or any number of action movie-sounding clichés which sound like they should be screamed in Arnold Schwarzenegger's voice, he instead stood still, closed his eyes, and braced for the impact.

Now the air was still and the scene held an eerie silence. Either that, or Justin's ears were just clogged with black sludge.

To his right, one of the black blobs began to stir and cough.

"Mike," Justin said, "Mike, are you ok?"

Mike had fallen forward, but had the clarity of reflex to put his arms in front of his face before it hit the pavement. He rolled onto his back, his front half clear of any goo.

"That just happened, didn't it?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," Justin answered.

Both of them sat dumbfounded, staring at the accident scene.

Other sludge-coated lumps started to stir. Justin counted. It appeared that all seven of his friends, plus a few more, were now stirring and slowly getting to their feet in various states of disrepair.

He reached inside his leather jacket, grabbing a swatch of t-shirt which had not been soiled, and cleaned his glasses. It took some effort. He wondered what this would mean for his hair and his goatee. For the moment, it didn't seem that any store-bought solution would help to get this muck off of his body.

When his glasses were usable but still horribly smeared, he took a clear-eyed look at the accident. He could see what was left of the hatchback, its roof jammed like a knife in the side of the large tanker which, he noticed, had a placard on the back proclaiming its contents "Hazardous Materials" along with two skull symbols inside triangles. His heart nearly stopped. He looked back at Mike who was now getting to his feet, then looked back for Char, who was also beginning to stand.

"Are you ok?" Justin asked her.

"Fine," she said, "What happened? What the hell is this stuff?"

"I don't know," Justin said, "But it can't be good."

He peeled the scarf, thoroughly saturated with the black mess, from around his neck with the tips of his fingers. He didn't know why he handled it so briskly, considering his hands were already completely covered in the same substance. He pulled the t-shirt on his chest forward to unstick it from himself, glanced down his collar, and found that whatever this was had soaked through his clothing and left a black residue on his skin.

Sirens, presumably from a rescue crew, echoed in the distance. They were on the sidewalk of a busy main drag in an urban area, so it was just as likely that those sirens were for some other emergency. Justin figured this would rate pretty high considering the placard on the back of the truck.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," Char whispered back.

"I'm so glad you're safe," he said, moving in to embrace her.

"Um, no," she said, taking a step back, "You're dirty, I'm relatively clean. Don't touch me."

"I'll hug you, buddy," said Mike, "It's not like I don't have this crap all over me already anyway."

"Thanks, man," Justin said, embracing his friend.

"It's ok," Mike said, "It's not like we're dying or... aw, crap, this stuff got in my beard when I hugged you!"

Justin sighed. He presumed Mike didn't see the placard and didn't think they were in danger. Really, Mike was scared to death but putting up a pretty good front to make it seem like he wasn't freaked out by being completely covered in hazardous materials.

Others were standing up: a woman whose face and hair were mostly shielded though the rest of her had been covered and a man who looked like he had been painted half-black.

The tips of her auburn hair now dipped into the mess coating her once pink winter coat.

"Well, these clothes are ruined," she said.

"You have other clothes, Jess," the man countered.

"This was my favorite pair of jeans," she argued, grabbing at her low-cut, now black, designer pants, "There is no way this crap is going to wash out."

"These are my favorite pants, too," he said, clutching at his worn jeans with holes in the knees, "You think I'm not going to try to wash them?"

"Are you both crazy?" shouted another man, thin and covered head to toe, looking as if he sought out the best splash zone for this incident, "Kurt, tell me you don't see the placard on the back of that truck. Tell me you didn't read where it says 'Hazardous Materials'. Tell me that and keep arguing about your stupid clothes and about how we're not all going to die in like five seconds."

Five seconds passed before anyone spoke. They did not die.

"Budda," said Jess, "Calm down."

"I will not calm down," Budda shouted, "I'm probably getting cancer as we speak!"

Further down the sidewalk, as his vocal friends argued, Justin counted and realized that they were missing their seventh member, Josh. Frantic, he looked around and saw one unmoving pile of slop near the window of the bar they had exited only moments before the accident.

Josh was lying face up on the ground, more coated in the substance than any of the others. Justin rolled him on his side and slapped his back hard. Josh coughed and spat out a long stream of black. Justin saw blood on the bare pavement where Josh's head had been. He must have hit the window ledge when the explosion occurred.

Justin shook him and tried to wake him up before Mike told him it probably wasn't a good idea to shake someone with a concussion. They sat him up against the wall. Mike did his best to put pressure on the back of Josh's head.

Justin swiped at the window of the bar with his sleeve, trying in vain to clear the glass. Two of their group, Emma - Josh's girlfriend - and Steph - Budda's girlfriend and Char's sister, were still inside and no doubt freaking out about the explosion and the black goo and their friends and significant others out here. He wanted to let them know they were all, for the moment, alive and well.

When he realized that clearing the window was less effective than cleaning his glasses, he wrote in the muck with his finger: ALL OK. He realized later that he wrote the letters backwards, as he should, but he did not spell it backwards. Emma, Steph, and the remainder of the patrons in the bar were left to ponder the significance of KO LLA.

By the time he made this realization, he was otherwise occupied.

The group of them outside had now circled up, surrounding the unconscious Josh near the window.

"Is he ok?" Kurt asked.

"Bumped his head pretty bad," Mike said, still applying pressure with a clean portion of his shirt, "Probably concussed. He's out cold at the moment."

"Not like it makes a difference," Budda said, "We're probably all dead anyway."

Justin clenched his eyes shut. He wanted to agree with Budda, but he didn't want to be so quick to admit defeat and bring down morale.

"Come on man," Kurt said, "It's not like we're melting or anything."

"Yet," said Budda.

"Hey," Jess interjected, "Maybe they left that sign on the truck by accident. Maybe it was there from the last load and they just forgot to take it off."

"Not likely," Budda said.

"Would you stop being so negative?" Justin shouted.

"You guys ok over there?" called a stranger, another accident victim noticeable by his coating in black sludge.

"We're all good," called Justin, noticing that others covered in the black stuff now stood on the sidewalk, speaking with each other, looking equally confused.

Police and ambulances arrived one after the other. Medics began to separate people for treatment, cops questioned everyone individually about what they'd seen of the accident. It would be a few hours before everyone was together again.

Inside the bar, Emma and Steph were doing their best not to panic as the other patrons continued to stare into an opaque mess of black dripping down the front window interrupted only by Justin's vain attempt to clear a spot with his sleeve and his cryptic message, KO LLA.

Emma took to pacing and twirling a lock of her curly, bottle-red hair around her finger. Steph sat in an empty booth and stared at the floor. The place was quiet except for the occasional slurring bark from one of the other patrons regarding the nature of the sludge. Some speculated that it was toxic, some claimed it was waste oil, one guy said that he'd seen it before but another person countered by telling them they were thinking of a movie.

They could see the red and blue lights glowing through the upper part of the window where the black stuff was slowly running off, leaving smears behind. They were now being joined by yellow lights. Emma assumed it was either the HAZMAT team or a tow truck.

"Attention bar patrons," said a voice over a loudspeaker outside, "Please proceed to the rear of the building and exit into the alley. Repeat: please proceed to the rear of the building and exit into the alley. If you require access to the front of the building for any reason, please speak to the police representative who will meet you at the perimeter. Thank you for your cooperation."

The bartender took this as a sign that she was closing for the night and chased all of her patrons including pacing Emma and catatonic Steph out the back door and into the cold winter night.

"We've got to go now that we're out," said Emma, "We've got to find out what happened to them."

Steph nodded and remained silent, putting the hood of her bright green sweatshirt over her short brown hair. She followed Emma down the alleyway. They were the last patrons out of the building. The others all drifted away to their cars and then home, chalking this up as another You'll-Never-Guess-What-Happened-At-The-Bar story. Steph and Emma approached the policeman instead.

"Our friends," Steph blurted as they got near him.

The officer turned, spotting them. Steph was now pointing emphatically toward the front of the bar. Emma remained silent which she knew was her right. She wasn't a huge fan of cops.

"You knew people out there?" the cop asked, motioning to the area which suddenly began to glow with the spotlights of the HAZMAT team.

"My sister," Steph said nodding, "Our boyfriends, a few others... they were waiting for us. We ran back to go to the bathroom and missed everything. We should have been out there with them. We could have been."

"Ok, calm down," the cop said, "Don't worry, we'll help you reconnect. Latest I heard everyone was relatively fine. One person has a concussion from hitting his head on the windowsill, but other than that, it's just some scrapes and bruises."

"What about that toxic waste crap?" Emma asked in an angry shout, "How can you say they're fine when they're covered in that stuff?"

"Look, Miss," said the cop, "I don't know anything about the chemicals or whatever was involved. All I know is that if you have someone up front, they're taking them to the hospital."

"I walked here," said Steph, "I can't get to the hospital."

"I don't have a car," Emma added, "There's no way we're going to be able to follow the ambulances."

The cop sighed.

"If you need some help, I guess you can hop in the back of my cruiser," he said, "I can get you out there, but you'll have to find your own ride home."

"Deal," said Emma, speaking for both of them.

The nervous pair of ladies sat in the back of the police cruiser until the ambulances blared away from the scene. They sped off after them. There was no communication between them other than Steph grabbing Emma's hand for support as they neared the hospital doors.

The cop walked them in and told them to stay put in the waiting room. He promised them he'd be back quickly with some information on their friends.

As he walked away, Emma noticed something out of the corner of her eye and brought it to Steph's attention as she turned to look. Emma told her not to stare, just in case.

The something Emma noticed was a man, older and pale with perfectly placed white hair. He wore a black suit with black necktie. The pair of sunglasses covering his eyes seemed odd considering they were inside and it was the middle of the night. A pin on his lapel gleamed catching the reflection of the overhead fluorescent lights.

The man turned his head in their direction. He was staring at them. Emma could feel it even though his eyes were hidden. He began walking toward them; all business, no expression. She felt the same bubble of hot fear in her stomach as she did when the accident first happened.

They both averted their eyes quickly, thinking that he might go away if they weren't looking anymore.

"You were at the accident scene?" he asked, his voice as emotionless as his face.

"Yes," Steph managed, stammering, "We... we're looking for our friends. They came in from the chemical..."

"I know who your friends are," he interrupted, "We are taking care of them. They are not currently in any danger. Please follow me."

He turned on his heels and walked at his brisk, business-like pace. The girls looked at each other for approval before deciding to take his suggestion. They both felt there was no other choice. If they were going to see their friends, they would have to do as this man said.

The pale man lead them through a series of white hallways and back corridors not usually seen by the public. They reached a maintenance elevator and stepped on. He pushed a button, neither of them paid attention to which one.

They tried to ask him questions as the elevator rose. He silenced them with a quick gesture of his hand. Emma got the feeling that this man was an authority figure of some magnitude and did not enjoy answering to anyone.

They exited the elevator onto one of the upper floors. It appeared to be a typical ward but the hallway, usually frantic with activity between the nurses' station and the orderlies, was silent and abandoned. Computers sat dark, chairs were empty, and the desktops were completely clean.

At the end of the hall, he ushered them into a dark, empty room.

"So," Emma said, "Where are our friends?"

"They are being seen to, Emma," he said.

"How do you know my name?" she asked, "What the hell is going on here? Where is everyone? Who the hell are you?"

He sighed. He didn't attempt to silence her. Emma got the feeling that it was time for answers.

"My name is Agent Williams," he said, removing his sunglasses to reveal his cold, blue eyes, "I am with the government agency responsible for the substance involved in the accident. Your friends are currently being taken care of by our team of experts. You will be given liberty to see them as soon as they are detoxified and tested."

"When will that be?" Steph asked.

"Soon, Ms. Gentile," he said, "Until then, we must ask that you remain quarantined to this room and this ward."

"Quarantined?" Emma said, "We didn't touch that stuff. Why do we need to be quarantined?"

"For your own safety," he said in a manner which didn't make Emma feel safe, "As well as the safety and comfort of your friends and significant others. I understand both of your boyfriends were touched by this incident. It is likely that your attachment to this group of people would warrant your constant attention. Am I correct?"

"Yes," said Emma.

"Then you will remain on this ward, in this room until such time as you may visit your friends. We are offering you this as a courtesy. I understand this may not be the most hospitable of surroundings but I assure you that we will take you to your friends and loved ones as soon as they have been cleared by our physicians. Is this agreeable?"

"Uh," Emma said, looking at Steph who simply shrugged, "Fine."

He nodded.

"There will be an agent posted on your door. Should you need anything which this room does not already provide, ask them and it will be provided within reason. Thank you for your... patience with us." He put his sunglasses on and turned to leave.

"Agent Williams," Emma asked, causing him to stop, "What agency did you say you were with again?"

The corner of his mouth perked up into a strained smirk. It scared Emma more than anything else which had happened that night.

He closed the door as he left.

"What the hell is going on?" Steph asked.

"I don't know," Emma said, "But it's not good."

Emma took her cell phone from her purse only to find it had no signal. Steph's was the same. When they lifted the receiver on the room's archaic corded phone, there was no dial tone.

Emma ran to the door and opened it. At the corner of the hall was another agent – dressed in the same suit as Williams – except this one was disproportionately huge. His shoulders were so broad they could take up most of the hallway. He was around seven feet tall, bald, with a pair of eyebrow piercings glinting from behind the same style of dark shades Williams wore.

Just his turning to look at Emma gave her the creeps and she slammed the door.

"What's out there?" said Steph, going to the window of the room and holding her phone to the glass, praying for signal.

"I don't know what you would call it but it's gigantic and scary," she said.

"What do we do now?" Steph asked, "It's not like any of us has done anything wrong, have we?"

"It doesn't look like any of them have really done anything wrong, sir" said a younger female as Agent Williams walked into a small makeshift situation room, "The worst they've got between them is a couple of speeding tickets and parking violations. These guys are totally clean. Too clean."

"What about the personality profiles, Agent Briggs," Williams asked her, "I do not care what they have done, I am more concerned with who they are."

She tapped at a thick piece of glass with the image of a keyboard on the surface. A set of pictures appeared showing all of the people involved in the accident.

"None of them seem to be a threat, sir," she said, "Offer them the package and it's likely they'll keep their mouths shut without any issue."

"Have any of them been exhibiting the side effects?" he asked.

"Three, sir," she said, nodding. She tapped at the glass screen and highlighted three of the pictures.

He sighed.

"Three will be... difficult to handle," he said, "Are any related to the large group?"

"One," she said, "Subject began exhibiting symptoms almost as soon as she arrived at the hospital."

"Details on the group," he said.

"Not much to tell, sir," she said, "Seven effected, nine total in the group counting the two you just brought up. They're mostly college students with retail jobs. Again, none are classified as a threat. From the intel I could gather they're just a bunch of nerds. Spend most of their nights playing video games or watching movies."

"I will have to know how to spin this," he said, "I want a full report in an hour."

"Yes, sir," she said, "You'll have it in half-an-hour."

"Very good," he said, "Three."

"I know, sir," she said, "It could be a bigger problem than we anticipated."

"If the rest have not yet shown signs, it is likely we should experience no further issue," he said, "Leave them their memories, Agent Briggs. Soon it will be all they have of her. There is no need to continue complicating this matter."

"Sir?" she began.

"Yes," he interrupted, "I am sure."

His eyes opened to complete darkness.

Josh panicked and sat straight up. His eyes were wide open but he could still see nothing but black. His hand reached out for his bedside lamp and struck something which fell to the floor with a clatter and a splash.

He groped around eventually finding a plastic bedrail. Moving his hand down the side, he pressed a button in a recessed panel causing his feet to elevate. He felt a sharp tug in his arm as he reached and used his other hand to find a thin tube leading away from him. He realized where he was.

As he blinked, he felt his eyelashes scrape against something. He felt at his face and found gauze covering his eyes like a blindfold. His heart pumped with anxiety as he wondered what happened. The last thing he remembered was going drinking with his friends. He hoped this wasn't some kind of urban legend scenario where someone slipped him a ruffie and removed his eyeballs to be sold on the black market.

The back of his head throbbed with pain. He reached to console it and found another piece of gauze covering what felt like a hell of a lump. He winced as his hand ran over it.

"The impact knocked you back," said a serious and unfamiliar voice, "You hit your head on the windowsill of the bar."

"Who is that?" he asked, his voice strained and scratchy, "Where am I?"

"Relax," said the serious man, "You have nothing to fear."

Josh tried to shout out an objection and began coughing. His mouth was overly dry. He felt like he had been gargling beach sand.

A strong hand grasped his wrist and placed a plastic cup in his hand.

"Drink," he said, "You will need to rehydrate. You have been through an intense series of detoxification treatments. Of all those caught in the accident, you were the most saturated by the chemical material."

It came rushing back to him as he chugged water from the plastic cup. The little white car, the big tanker truck, the crash, the black stuff...

"Oh, God," he said, dropping the cup, "I'm blind. It got in my eyes, didn't it? That's why I'm bandaged. You had to cut out my eyes or something, didn't you? I'm never going to see again."

"Calm down," said the man, "You are safe to remove the gauze from your eyes."

Josh felt for the tape on the back of his head and ripped at the bandages. When he reached the end of the six overlapping layers, he could feel cotton balls taped to his eyes. He quickly ripped them off.

His eyes were dry and it hurt to blink. He reached out for another cup of water and poured it over his face with his eyes wide open granting him much relief.

The room was a wash out of bright white light whose only interruption was a blurred figure of black sitting next to him. His head now throbbed in the front as well as the back as he struggled to focus.

The black blur reached out to him with something that glinted in the light. Josh jumped back, hoping he wasn't about to be stabbed with a scalpel by some crazy guy who broke into his hospital room.

"Your glasses," said the man.

Josh reached out tentatively, snatched them from his hand and quickly put them on.

"Guess you're not the doctor," Josh said, looking at his visitor.

"Decidedly not," he said.

"Am I in some kind of trouble?" Josh asked, concerned why a man in a black suit with black sunglasses would be sitting at his bedside.

"You are in the hospital," the man said, "I believe that would constitute being in a particular degree of trouble."

"Who are you?" Josh asked.

"My name is Agent Williams," he replied, his face expressionless, "The substance in the tanker was property of our organization and was on its way to be destroyed before it was violently released in the accident."

"Great," Josh said, retreating again to panic, "So this is some kind of crazy government-level toxic waste. Are you here to tell me I'm melting? Am I being liquefied from the inside out? Am I radioactive?"

"I assure you," said Agent Williams in a non-assuring manner, "The substance in which you were covered will have no adverse effects on your health."

"Then what was with the eye wraps?" Josh asked, "What was with this 'intense series of detox treatments' you mentioned?"

"We had to be sure that none of the chemical remained in your system," he said, "We don't want to be responsible for any as-yet-unknown issue resulting from long-term exposure to the substance. Our physicians tell us that it is better to expel it now. You may be pleased to know that aside from the bump on your head our doctors have found you to be perfectly healthy."

"Fantastic," Josh said, "Except for the fact that I have no idea where I am or if any of my friends survived."

"Again, you are in the hospital," said Williams, his expression unchanging and his bedside manner leaving Josh wanting now that he could see this, "Your friends are doing well. They are waiting for you in another room. You and Ms. Gentile were the only two from your small group who had extensive problems following the incident. We had to hold you both separately."

"You mean Char," Josh said, "What happened to her?"

"There were fifteen people involved in the accident, including the drivers of the vehicles," said Williams, "As of now there have been no fatalities."

Josh felt only slightly relieved. "No fatalities" was rather ambiguous. He was sure this was a common tactic for someone claiming to be a government agent. The look was right, but he wasn't sure he bought it yet. One thing stood out to him and it was a pin worn on the lapel of the Agent's suit – a black circle around a Roman numeral XIII over a red background. Agent Williams caught him staring and stood to leave.

"There are scrubs in the dresser," he said, "I suggest you put them on. We have destroyed your clothes and personal effects due to their potential saturation with the substance. You will be provided with exact duplicates of your belongings at the end of your quarantine."

"Quarantine?" Josh asked, swinging his legs off the bed and catching a cold draft up the back of his hospital gown.

"We are doing what is necessary for your safety," he said, "Trust us. Everything will be fine. When you are through dressing, please knock on the door. I will wait for you outside."

The Agent left the room.

Josh didn't trust him. Josh didn't believe that everything would be fine.

He dropped his hospital gown and changed into the blue scrubs he'd been provided.

Looking himself over in the mirror, he saw that his skin was pale, his lips were cracked and chapped, and his eyes were bloodshot. He looked like hell.

He also caught sight of a piece of white tape attached to his elbow. Ripping it off quickly, he realized it was the cotton balls which were originally taped to his eyes. He stepped on the pedal of the biohazard bin in his room and noticed something just before throwing them away which made him stop dead.

It was the ooze – the black stuff in which they'd all been covered – two small dots of it clinging to the cotton. Obviously the detox wasn't as intense as the Agent had hoped. He knew he had to keep it. He had a friend at his college with a lab. He could get it analyzed and find out the exact flavor of danger they'd stumbled into. He was very confident that things would not turn out well after this, but he wanted to be sure of his fear.

He pulled a latex glove from a box mounted to the wall, stuffed the cotton balls inside, tied it shut and stuffed it into the pocket of the scrubs. He was fairly certain he wouldn't be subject to a pat down when he left the room, but the thought had crossed his mind.

He tapped twice on the door.

"Ready to go back to Gen-Pop, Warden," he said.

The door opened. Though he couldn't see the eyes of Agent Williams, he was sure he was being given quite a stern look before being lead down the hallway.

In the corner of the large operating room which had been converted into a temporary ward sat Justin. He sat on the bleached white tile floor, his back against a steel instrument cabinet, staring at the wall. He scratched idly at his back, his mind racing with thoughts of Char and Josh, neither of whom had rejoined their small collective.

The operating room was a creepy and overly quiet place. The more Justin thought about that, the creepier it became.

At some point, he postulated, blood had likely spattered across almost every inch of this floor. Hundreds of people had probably died in this room from complications due to who knows what. How many –ectomies and –otomies and amputations had taken place here? How much gore and guts had been exposed to the open air before someone called for the time of death? He stopped thinking about Char and Josh because he couldn't get the gruesome thoughts of this room out of his head. These Agents had taken them out of a horrifying situation, promising safety, and shoved them in a room Justin saw as a place people go to die.

To top this all off, the place smelled heavily of burning hair.

"You ok?" asked Jess, standing over him in identical blue scrubs.

Justin just shook his head.

"Come on," she said, "Get up. Talk to everyone. Don't sulk, it's not good for you right now."

Justin sighed and stood up.

The room had been furnished with a few sub-divided couches with individual seats separated by wooden armrests and a large coffee table currently occupied by a game of Solitaire being played by Mike. The furniture had been dragged in from the lobby earlier by a few of the custodial staff. It had been, he assumed, commandeered by whoever was in charge of this operation to make their extended stay seem more comfortable. It would have made him more comfortable if it didn't look like furniture from a hospital lobby.

A TV had been wheeled in on a cart and connected to the Hospital's cable. Budda knelt in front of it like a six-year old as he watched cartoons. His tall, lanky frame made this look especially immature.

Kurt was lying in one of the hospital beds on which they slept. He was using a lighted ear probe to read a three-month old magazine, also commandeered from the lobby.

Jess sat down in one of the couch sections and resumed coloring a picture in a book with crayons that had been stripped of all paper, worn down to nubs, and broken on one end.

"I'm supposed to be at work right now," Justin said.

"Most of us are," Mike answered, "I own a business. You know how much money it's costing me to be closed today? Cookies don't bake themselves."

"I'm missing class," Jess said, "Typically you're not supposed to ditch when you're in grad school."

"We're missing from the world," Kurt said, "We all are. No one out there knows what happened to us. No one knows about the accident except the people who were at the bar last night and none of them are close friends of ours, so no one would have said anything about it outside our circle."

"I'm not missing," said Budda, his eyes still glued to the TV.

Kurt narrowed his eyes and returned to his magazine.

"What about Char and Josh?" Justin asked, "Why aren't they here?"

"Josh smacked his head pretty hard," Budda said, zoned out, "Probably had to get treated for a concussion or something."

"What is with you and that TV?" Jess asked, "Is it really that interesting?"

"It's the only thing keeping me calm right now," Budda answered through clenched teeth.

"I understand Josh hit his head," said Justin, his volume escalating, "But, Char was perfectly fine when we left the scene. What happened and why are they keeping her from us?"

"I'm sure everything's fine," said Kurt.

"It's obviously not fine," shouted Justin, "If it were fine, she'd be here right now."

"Relax," said Jess, "Stay calm. I think we're all letting the captivity get to us."

"Not getting to me. I'm fine," said Mike, sniffing the air, "What smells like burning hair?"

"You're right," said Justin, sniffing the air and acknowledging Mike's observation rather than Jess's request to calm down, "Wasn't there a second ago."

The opaque automatic doors of the operating room swished open revealing Josh dressed in the same blue scrubs as the rest of them. The five of them rushed the door to greet their friend. Amidst handshakes and hugs and questions of well-being from both sides, the Agent entered the room behind him.

The room went dead silent at his appearance. No one in the room but Josh had seen him or any other authority figure beyond the hospital staff who kindly encouraged them to stay in this temporary ward during their detox treatments. They all watched as his head swiveled to survey the room through his dark sunglasses.

"I have not yet been properly introduced to most of you," he started, "That is acceptable. After your stay, you are to forget you ever met me. If you feel that you will have difficulty with this task, we are fully equipped to assist you."

The room remained silent. No one offered an objection.

"My name is Agent Williams," he continued, "I represent the agency responsible for the substance in which you were covered during the unfortunate accident last night. It was fortunate we were able to get you to the hospital quickly enough to flush the chemical from you and ensure that the foreign substance was completely removed from your bodies.

"This particular chemical exhibits no abreaction to a majority of subjects, however, we have discovered that a small percentage..."

"Char," Justin interrupted causing the rest of the group to gasp, as if he had just pulled the pin on a grenade, "You're talking about Char, right?"

The Agent's gaze turned to Justin.

"Please understand that..." the Agent started.

"What did you do to her?" Justin shouted, cutting the Agent off. The rest of the group notably cringed at his second interruption as if they expected him to be dragged away and never heard from again, "Where is she? Is she dying? Is she dead?"

The Agent waited a moment before answering, causing a palpable tension in the room. Even Justin now thought that this guy was a half-second away from punching him in the face. He didn't seem like the type of person who was used to insubordination.

"We respect that you have a relationship with her," the Agent continued, now clearly staring at Justin, his calm and emotionless demeanor never breaking which caused the lot of them to be completely unnerved, "At the moment, there is nothing to report. We recognized the preliminary symptoms of the abreaction and her condition has, for the moment, been stabilized. As I was previously stating before the interruption, this only occurs in a small percentage of persons affected."

"So," Josh said, making sure to wait until the Agent paused, "You lied to me when you said this stuff would have 'no adverse effects on my health.'"

"No," he said, "I stated that you would experience no adverse effects from the chemical, which is true. You do not possess the same genetic marker which causes the noted abreaction. None of you do. However, due to the amount of the chemical present on you as a result of the rather unfortunate circumstances, you must remain here under observation for another twenty-four hours before you will be able to depart."

"Twenty-four hours?" shouted Kurt, "Seriously? Some of us have jobs. I can't just blow off work."

"Some of us run businesses," Mike said, "I can't keep my doors closed this long."

"Absence from your jobs has been discussed with your respective employers," said the Agent, "Your misfortune has been relayed to them along with the fact that you are currently in government custody for your own safety. They have all agreed to our terms and you will receive no reprimand of any kind due to your brief absence. As for the business owner, your losses will be compensated."

"What's happening to her," Justin said, clenching his fists and his teeth, "Tell me."

"I have told you," said the Agent, "She is part of a small percentage of..."

"No," Justin said, trying to get into the Agent's face before realizing that the guy was a good five inches taller than he was, "What's happening to her?"

That last phrase came out as more of a growl. Justin was now face-to-chin with the agent, looking up at him in a rather threatening manner. The rest of the group would later converse about how this was probably a horrible idea. Justin would scoff at them because it got results.

The Agent removed his sunglasses and stared down at Justin with piercing blue eyes.

"Currently," he said, his voice not wavering from its past tone, "She is undergoing treatment to attempt to stop the damage being done to her body. The abreaction noted previously causes severe and extremely painful chemical burns. We are doing everything we can to help her and your patience will be appreciated as the situation develops. She is under the care of government physicians and is receiving the most expert care available. Please relax in the knowledge that we are looking after her and have only her best interests in mind."

Justin kept his eyes locked with the Agent for a moment causing absolutely no visible intimidation and then turned away. The Agent replaced his sunglasses.

"What about our families?" Budda asked, "If you called our jobs, did you call them too? Can we do it ourselves? People are going to be nervous and looking for us."

"Anyone searching for you by means of a cellular phone call has been informed of your predicament," the Agent said, "This includes some of your family members. They have been instructed to be present if they feel it necessary when you are released from the hospital. It is preferable that you do not attempt to contact them at this time."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jess asked, "Is this, like, a cover-up or something?"

"We would prefer to disseminate only information which includes the proper and complete details," the Agent answered, "You have not yet been informed of these details in their entirety. This would allow for speculation on the part of those with whom you speak. You will be fully informed during a small debriefing before your departure tomorrow."

"If you will excuse me, I must tend to other things. You are not the only ones who were involved in this incident. There are eight others who require my consolation before the end of the day. An agent will be posted on your door. You may request anything within reason for your entertainment or nourishment."

Justin opened his mouth to say something.

"You will be informed of any changes in her condition," said the Agent as he turned to leave.

The automatic doors swished open and closed followed by the loud click of the lock.

"You ok?" Jess asked, approaching Justin.

He grunted and walked back to his instrument cabinet near the corner to sulk.

"Dude," Josh said, pulling his shirt over his nose, "This place stinks."

"We know," Mike said, "Like burning hair. You'll get used to it over the next hour or so. Come on, let's play some cards or something. We've got a whole day to kill."

Kurt returned to his magazine, Jess lay next to him to take a nap, Budda resumed his spot in front of the television, and Josh and Mike began a game which had not yet been decided.

Justin stared at the wall, lost in his anger and emotion. He didn't want to think about the worst happening to Char, but, at the same time, he couldn't avoid it. He sat with his hands on his knees and closed his eyes. Tears streamed down his cheeks, feeling cool against his hot angry skin.

It was not yet detectable, but the smell in the room was slowly growing stronger.

Emma and Steph awoke to sore backs and the blare of a ringing phone.

A bell in a phone was an unfamiliar sound to both of them. The only time they heard that sort of thing anymore was either in a period movie or when someone thought it was a clever cell phone ringtone.

The phone, from what they had established as fact over the past two days, was non-functional. They had tried to use it about once an hour and it never produced a dial tone. This added to the element of surprise even more than the suddenly shattered silence or the thought of the bell.

Emma picked up the receiver slowly as if it were a trap. Steph watched from the safety of her bed, hoping that this wasn't something awful.

"Hello?" she muttered, her voice tinged with surprise.

"This is Agent Williams," said the voice on the other end, "You will be escorted to the lobby in ten minutes. Make whatever preparations are required."

Emma could hear the click of the hangup, then the click of the phone once again going dead. She slapped at the cradle, hoping still yet for a dial tone, and getting nothing in return. She gently placed the receiver back where it belonged.

"Ten minutes," Emma said, "I think they're letting us out."

Steph nodded and started her preparations for departure.

This was the first time they were instructed to leave. They had been brought meals and afforded the luxury of cable during their stay. The beds were uncomfortable and the lack of communication and social media was enough to put both of them on edge. Emma imagined that this must be what minimum-security prison was like and suddenly thought that anyone who called it Camp Cupcake or the like only did so because they didn't understand how difficult isolation would be, even with some luxuries.

They did not understand why they had to be kept in the hospital, presumably far away from their group of friends. Both of them wanted very badly to just go home until this whole thing was complete.

Emma pulled her wild mane of curly red hair back into a pony tail and dressed herself. Steph sorted her short brown hair out with a barrette or two she'd had in her purse. Neither of them thought they would look good in any way considering their last forty-eight or so hours.

Earlier, the idea had crossed Emma's mind that they might be able to overcome the agent posted across the hall from them and escape from their temporary prison. Aside from the fact that his head nearly exceeded the maximum height of the hallway and his shoulders its maximum width, not to mention the obvious bulge of a firearm inside his coat, she thought she could probably take him. Steph wound up talking her down, citing only that it might get their friends in a greater degree of trouble. She never mentioned anything about Emma being out of her league as far as taking the big guy down.

In precisely ten minutes, there was a knock at the door.

The gigantic agent stood waiting for them, the top of the door jamb obscuring most of his bald head. The pin on his lapel glinted in the light. It was the same one Emma had seen on Agent Williams – a black roman numeral XIII inside a black circle over a red background. Obviously all the agents Williams had referred to were playing on his team.

"Ladies, please follow me," he said.

His voice was deep and carried a heavy southern accent. He offered a smile to them as he turned to lead. Both of them would later agree that he was probably a charmer in addition to being akin to the Incredible Hulk.

"You sure don't look like any kind of government agent," Emma said as they walked, "Bald head, no eyebrows, body piercings... I thought you couldn't have any identifying features?"

He stopped. Both of them flinched as if he was going to turn around swinging. He leaned down to her and lowered his sunglasses along his nose. They stared each other in the eye, Emma trying her best to show no intimidation.

"You watch too many movies, darlin'," he said before continuing on.

"This is amazing," Josh said, "How did you do that? I mean, someone hand-made that shirt for me, like, a million years ago. Where did you find this fabric?"

Agent Williams didn't answer. His expression was deadpan as he supervised the return of the group's goods. Each of them had a sealed plastic bag full of every item on their person on the night of the incident down to the smallest detail, from the duct tape around Kurt's shoes to the flour sticking to Mike's fleece shirt from the bakery.

Justin stared at the pile in front of him. He looked at Agent Williams with disdain.

"Is something not to your satisfaction?" asked the Agent.

"Yeah," Justin said, "This scarf isn't the same."

"I assure you, it is," he responded, "The utmost care was taken in the reproduction of these items down to the thread count. We accounted for inconsistencies in the knitting stroke as we knew it was hand-made. We have matched the colors exactly."

"Did you get my grandmother to knit it?" Justin asked.

The Agent stared silently at him from behind his sunglasses.

"Then it's not the same thing," Justin said, "My grandmother knitted that scarf for me. This is just a reproduction. I want my real scarf back."

"Dude," Jess said, putting her hand on his shoulder, "Let it go."

"I'm not going to let it go," Justin said, shrugging her hand away and fixing his stare on the Agent, "It was my scarf and I want it back. The real one."

"Your previous possessions have been incinerated," Williams said, his tone unchanging, "They were contaminated and, as such, were considered a risk. I believe I have explained this to you twice already. We have extended you the courtesy of duplicate items. Please do not take our hospitality for granted. What you have could just as easily be taken away from you."

"I'm just trying to make a point," Justin said.

"Your point has been noted," said Williams.

The two stared each other down for a moment longer before Justin began redressing himself along with the rest of his friends.

While the agent wasn't looking, Josh was busy stuffing something into his jacket pocket.

"Playing cards?" Mike asked in a whisper, "You're taking the cards with you?"

"What?" Josh asked, giving Mike an over-obvious look to silence him, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You are stealing a pack of playing cards from the hospital," Mike whispered, recognizing but ignoring Josh's signs.

"So what if I am?" Josh said, continuing his look.

"You're a kleptomaniac, that's what," Mike said, "Dude, that's like taking candy from a baby."

"I guess it is," said Josh, "I'll explain later, just shut the hell up."

When they were dressed and ready, Agent Williams led them beyond the automatic doors and into the hallway. They were all excited to leave the place due to the continuous smell of burning hair. Though not as bad, it seemed to follow them as they were lead away from the ward.

As they walked, Agent Williams was met by a younger woman with a suit and sunglasses identical to his down to the lapel pin. Black hair was pulled into a bun at the back of her head, held in place by two red chopsticks.

"Sir," she mumbled (everyone could hear), "I'd like to suggest the alternate method we discussed earlier. I still believe that this is a bad idea and that you should leave the situation to me."

"Your objection is noted, Agent Briggs," he said in a normal tone.

"Sir, we can fix this permanently," she said, still trying to whisper, "I can fix this."

"Your report was enlightening, Agent Briggs, however I believe that this is the proper course of action," he continued, "'No perceivable threat' were your exact words. I intend to abide by that. We must leave this as untouched as possible considering what has already been done."

"Yes, sir," she said, sighing before she disappeared down another hallway.

The group reached the door of the hospital's chapel. Inside, they found Emma and Steph as well as some of their parents and family who had come after being given the phone messages Williams had described. There were a few strangers, presumably the loved ones of the others they'd seen covered in the black goo.

The next hour or so was a blur for all of them. Tearful reunions, Agent Williams recounting the accident blow for blow, explaining the nature of the "abreaction" which, they found, had happened to Char and two others. None of them really paid attention to anything until Williams started talking money.

"Due to the intense emotional stress visited upon victims of this extreme situation," said Williams, "Both at the scene and during their quarantine here, our agency will compensate those affected to help ease your burden."

"We realize that we can neither replace the time you have lost, nor can we reverse any permanent side effects which may carry over should the afflicted survive. What we can offer is a

substantial monetary allotment to aid you in this hour of need. You will leave here today with cash in hand. Each settlement will be discussed with the appropriate parties. This money is given freely under one condition: you must never reveal anything regarding this incident to any media source.”

“Hush money,” Budda said, nodding in understanding.

The rest of the room turned their attention to him, then began talking amongst themselves.

Agent Williams turned to Budda with what Justin was sure was the same look he’d been given behind those sunglasses.

“Understand that this is compensation for services rendered,” Williams said, “The service you provide will be your discretion. For this, your compensation will be remarkable. In order to guarantee this exchange, all those present will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I have been told that, if you remain living within your budgets, you will never have to work another day in your life.”

This quieted any objections spurred by Budda’s comment. The kind of money Williams was talking about was nothing to shirk at and everyone in the room knew it.

“If there are no further objections, I will now adjourn our meeting,” Williams said, “My subordinate, Agent Moorsblade, will be waiting at the door for your signature upon which you will receive your settlement. Thank you again for your patience and your discretion.”

Agent Williams disappeared through a back door. The crowd mulled around before Agent Moorsblade called everyone’s attention and told them to line up for their money. His accent and general demeanor would have helped to make him more approachable if he were not the size of a large truck.

They could now see everyone involved who had not exhibited the mysterious abreaction mentioned multiple times over the course of their stay.

A goth girl, probably college age, fought with her father near the front of the line. Her purple-streaked bottle-black hair together with her leather jacket and exaggerated eye makeup gave her scene affiliation away. They were beginning to draw attention, but what they were saying was made largely unintelligible by their sheer volume let alone the fact that the man was very drunk. Agent Moorsblade had to stand up to get their attention. This was all he had to do to let them know he meant business. They signed their document, received a brief case, and continued fighting outside.

A tall, dark-skinned man, also college age, stared after her. He was easy to pick out in the crowd not just because of his height but due to the fact that he was dressed in red athletic gear from head to toe. His head was neatly shaved bald. He, unlike the girl his eyes followed out of the room, was unaccompanied as were most of those present. He was the next to sign and leave.

Behind him was another accompanied girl, a teenager with long blonde hair, standing with a slightly older but still attractive woman who could probably pass for an older sister rather than her mother if she were so complimented. The girl was the only one in the room who still wore the blue scrubs. Draped over her shoulder was a clear garment bag containing an elaborate, sequined, purple gown. She carried a pair of matching high-heeled shoes in her other hand. Their posture indicated they were currently not speaking to each other.

The group was next. Agent Moorsblade would say to each of them in his calming southern drawl:

“What you are about to sign is a legal document stating that you will neither pursue the matter of this incident any further nor will you discuss said incident with anyone aside from those who already know of it, including, but not limited to, the media – print, broadcast or otherwise. If any details of this incident reaching a public source are traced back to you, you will forfeit the right to all titles, properties, goods, and assets granted to you by both your previous merit and this monetary settlement you agree to receive forthwith following the placement of your good ol’ Johnny Hancock right here on this little black line.

“In short; you sign, we give you money. You screw us, we screw you harder. Get it?”

“I get it,” Justin said, rolling his eyes when he received the speech.

They all scribbled their names on the bottom of the thick document and received a black briefcase in turn.

Agent Moorsblade stopped Steph at the end of the group’s line. He whispered a few things to her before Budda rushed to catch her as she almost fainted.

“Y’all have a good day, now,” said Moorsblade through a fake and dangerous smile, returning to his desk to deal with the rest of those in line.

When they were all safely outside, Justin grabbed Steph’s arm and asked:

“What did he tell you? Was it something about Char?”

“Sort of,” Steph managed, “He told me... He told me because of the severity of her issue, they were going to give our family a little more than everyone else.”

“How much more?” Justin asked.

Steph stepped up and whispered a few things to him before Mike rushed to catch him as he almost fainted. Justin was a deal heavier than Steph, however, and both of them ended up on the ground.

“That’s not good,” Justin said, looking up at her.

“I know,” she said, sighing and helping him up, “But, there isn’t really anything we can do.”

Justin’s blood boiled with the thought. That much money given to Char’s family could only mean one thing.

He decided against rushing back into the hospital and fighting his way to her, mostly because the tiny bit of his brain which was still rational told him that he’d probably get himself killed or arrested. There was also nothing he could do for her. He wasn’t a doctor. Most of his medical knowledge derived from primetime dramas. The rest of it came from WebMD. While these qualifications made him feel as though he could help, he realized that his Dr. House impression would not help professionals break the case.

The government had sent black cars staffed by chauffers wearing the same lapel pin they’d seen on Agents Williams and Moorsblade. The group agreed to go to lunch together and left their five government drivers idling in the parking lot of the restaurant as they did.

Justin remained pensive and angry even while everyone cracked jokes about their situation. Typically, he would be leading the charge, however, with Char in dire straits his mind would not let itself wander. He remained silent, continuing to think about whatever horrors she was going through. He could feel the rage building inside him, even after lunch when he had arrived back at their apartment.

He felt warm. His fingers and toes were tingling. He figured he should lie down but, when he did, he found himself staring at the empty side of their queen-sized bed where Char would normally have been. Sniffing the air, trying to find some solace in the familiar scent of their bedroom, he could smell nothing but the same burning hair stench as he had back in the makeshift ward.

He got up, frustrated, stripped his clothes, tossed them into the hamper and changed. He sprayed at the hamper with an air freshener just to be safe.

He wandered into the living room and sat down in his armchair. He thought he might be able to distract himself by watching a little TV only to find that the cable was having technical difficulties, as dictated by his cable box.

He was fed up, quite literally. He felt as if the rage had filled him to his brim. His head felt like it was going to explode right before it actually did.

His hair, with a loud whoosh as if throwing a match on a puddle of lighter fluid, exploded into a pillar of flames.

The next morning, on the other side of town, Emma sat at her computer.

She felt restored from sleeping on her own bed and, as she had crawled into it shortly after returning home, had no time to check her social media. She felt disconnected and unplugged from the world after two days trapped in the dead zone of the hospital room.

She searched local news sites but there was no mention of the accident. She assumed that this was the work of Agent Williams and his mystery organization. He mentioned wanting to keep it out of the media. She didn't realize they'd instituted the full government blackout until just now.

The sun crept into the small apartment as it rose over the adjacent building and through her fourth floor window just as Josh crept out of the bedroom.

He mumbled a good morning and kissed her on the cheek. She jumped back as the kiss delivered a heavy static shock.

"What?" Josh asked.

"You shocked me," she said.

"What's so shocking about your boyfriend wanting to kiss you?" he asked, offended.

"No, moron," she said, "Static electricity. You literally shocked me."

"Oh," he said, "Sorry, I must have been dragging my feet."

He closed in for another kiss and Emma jumped again.

"That's enough for now, loverboy," she said, putting her arms up.

"Did I do it again?" Josh asked.

"Yes, now give it a rest," she said, "Go watch TV or something."

"Sorry," Josh said, slumping off to the couch.

As he turned around, she saw a sock, a pair of her panties, and a crumpled up black t-shirt stuck to his back.

"Hang on," she said

She stood and peeled the clothes from his back. It felt like taking a heavy magnet off of a refrigerator.

"What the hell did you do," she asked, "Sleep on balloons covered in wool? You're like a damned science experiment or something."

He offered no answer as she sat back down.

The TV blared as Josh turned it on and began cycling through channels.

"Turn it down," she shouted, "Some of us are trying to catch up on our lives here."

The volume decreased.

"Thank you," she said, frustrated, before looking down at her desk and seeing their cluster of remote controls sitting next to her keyboard.

She turned around and watched as Josh sluggishly touched his thumb to his finger, miming the action of using a remote, and making things happen to the TV.

She stopped what she was doing and sat next to him on the couch, staring at his hand. It responded to his every whim. She could see a small arc of electricity as his fingers touched together. She reached up to his hand and, as her finger made contact...

"Ow! Son of a bitch!" she screamed, shaking her hand off, feeling like she just stuck her finger into an outlet.

Josh turned to look at her.

"What now?" he asked.

"Do you even see what you're doing?" she asked in return.

"I'm watching TV," he said, "Look, I'm sorry if I shocked you a couple of times. It's winter, it's dry, this happens. I've got no control over it."

"No," she said, "You've got control of something else."

She pointed to his hand, still clicking away through the channels. They watched his hand in amazement as he continued clicking. They couldn't believe that something like this was happening until they put all the pieces together.

"Superpowers," Justin said, "We're all going to get superpowers."

Mike laughed.

"You've finally lost it, man," Mike said, "One too many comic books."

Mike's bakery was extraordinarily busy. His place was popular among many of the locals and he had been closed for two days. The orders on his answering machine had stacked up. He'd only let Justin into the bakery proper because Justin made it seem urgent. That feeling was quickly disappearing along with his patience.

Justin took his theory to Mike first, not just because they were practically brothers, but because the apartment he and Char rented was located three floors above the bakery. This put Mike in the strange position of being Justin's best friend as well as his landlord. This was the first time Mike felt that having his friend in his building may have been a bad idea. He went on preparing cookies as Justin continued talking.

"I'm serious, dude," Justin said.

"Look," Mike said, "I get it. We play tabletop games together. I understand the desire for fantasy but, really, we should be more excited we don't have seven kinds of cancer from that black stuff rather than waiting for superpowers to happen."

"It's the trope, though," Justin said, "This is how tons of superhero origin stories start. Think about it: shady government agency, unknown chemical, extended observation in the hospital..."

"I have thought about it," Mike said, "My thoughts were that I'm excited to be alive and not immediately reduced to a puddle or riddled with tumors."

Justin glared at him. He was still worried about Char and her fate in the hospital. She didn't make it out as lucky as Mike had described. He thought Mike was being flippant and dismissive of her condition. She got whatever this was the worst of anyone.

"I want you to believe me before-" Justin started.

"Before what?" Mike interrupted, "Before I call dibs on being Wolverine because your pop-culture stuffed brain is short-circuiting with PTSD?"

"That's mean, man," Justin said, clenching his fists, "Why would you say something like that?"

"Because you need to be real," Mike said, "Do you think those government guys would have ever let us out of the hospital if super powers were on the table? Hell no. They'd be on you like white on rice. You'd be shadowed 24/7. They wouldn't want to push a liability like that out into the open world."

"I don't think they knew this would happen," Justin said.

"They had to know," Mike replied, "They kept us under observation for a reason."

"Yeah, to make sure what's happening to Char right now didn't happen to us," Justin shouted, "But I don't think they took this kind of thing into consideration."

"Prove it, then," Mike said, "Prove to me that something other than what's going on is... do you smell smoke?"

"Took you long enough," Justin said.

"Something's burning," Mike said, running to the ovens, checking every tray.

"Mike," Justin said, trying to get his attention.

"I know that smell," Mike said, "It's familiar. Like what we smelled in the hospital. Burning hair."

"Mike," Justin said again.

"Where would that be coming from," Mike pondered, checking himself over, patting at his head.

"Mike," Justin shouted, finally gaining his attention.

Justin took off his stocking cap to reveal his hair, which had now become a floating stream of smoke over his bald head. It looked as if he were a match which had just been blown out. The smoke rose a few inches from his scalp, shifting and smoldering,

Mike was stunned. He stood silent, his jaw agape, for a few moments. He stepped closer and slowly put his hand into the smoke, watching it move around his fingers. It didn't leave a billowing cloud; it either dissipated or stopped at a fair height without leaving any trace.

"This is a trick, right?" Mike asked.

Justin rolled his eyes.

"Dude, your head is smoking," Mike said.

"Yeah," Justin replied, "It kinda exploded yesterday after we got home from the hospital."

"Exploded?" Mike asked, pausing, then adding, "You didn't set the apartment on fire did you?"

"Dude, more important things are happening," Justin said, "I know you're my land lord and all, but we're talking about real-deal super human abilities here. This is crazy mutant power stuff!"

"The top of your head exploded," Mike said, deadpan.

"Yes," Justin explained, "In a giant pillar of flame which may or may not have scorched the living room ceiling."

"Really?" Mike pleaded, "Dammit, man."

"Oh, come on," Justin said, "I'll pay for the damages, if there are any. We all got briefcases full of cash. Shouldn't be much of a problem. Now, let's not worry about the damn ceiling. Super powers!"

Justin shouted the last part while pointing at his head.

Mike turned around.

"You're serious," he said.

"As a heart attack," Justin said, "I don't think there's any way I could make my head constantly smolder. It's either super powers or real-life CGI. Either way, it's amazing."

"Ok," Mike said, turning back to face Justin, "Can you do anything other than smoke hair?"

"Well, I was messing around a bit while trying to light a cigarette," Justin said, "I found out I can do this."

Justin flicked his thumb at his index finger. His thumb was now on fire.

Mike jumped back. He was suddenly a caveman seeing the miracle of flames for the first time. He reached out to touch it and pulled his hand away as it burned.

"Yes," Justin said, "Fire hot."

"Have you talked to anyone else yet?" Mike asked.

"You're the first," Justin said, "I probably would have sounded crazy to anyone over the phone. I had to show you. I knew you would believe me."

"Do you think the rest of us will get superpowers?" Mike asked.

"I assume so," Justin said, "We're all part of the same origin story. It wouldn't go along with the trope if we didn't all get something out of it. We were covered in that same chemical, most of us with no horrifying side-effects."

"I would consider super abilities a pretty damn horrifying side-effect," Mike said.

"Horrifying? Nah," Justin said, "Awesome more like."

"Horrifying until you learn to really control that," Mike said, "What if you fly off the handle and incinerate someone?"

"Doubtful," Justin said, "I've read all the comics. I've played the RPGs. I'm in full control."

As he said this, he dropped his still flaming thumb and hand to his side and caught his sleeve on fire. Mike quickly grabbed a fire-extinguisher and put him out. Both of them started laughing when the situation was over.

"What's my super power, then?" Mike asked.

"I think I picked up on it while we've been talking," Justin said.

"Ok, what is it?" Mike asked, "Danger sense? Ability to predict when people's words will bite them in the ass? Cookie making?"

"Your feet haven't touched the ground since we started talking," Justin said, pointing, "Take a look."

As Justin said, Mike had been floating a full six inches from the ground the entire time.

"Well," Mike said, taking off his apron, "That's a start. Let's make some phone calls."

The phone was ringing.

Budda rolled over and looked at the clock. It was a few minutes after noon.

He called in to work earlier to tell them that he quit and slept comfortably knowing that the money given to him by the government would be enough to sustain him for a very long time.

He was attempting to sleep in but was having a very difficult time of it. He didn't feel like he needed to sleep and took to lying in bed either staring at the ceiling or the back of his eyelids. While neither seemed like a very rewarding pastime, he had no desire to get up and greet the day just yet.

The phone was still ringing. Likely someone trying to end his lazy streak was on the other end. He sighed as he rolled over, his bed creaking hideously, and grabbed the phone.

"Hello," he muttered.

"Dude," said Josh's voice, "Dude, get up. It's like Christmas."

"Christmas isn't for like a month and a half," he said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

There was pause on the other end of the line.

"Nothing weird has been going on with you today?" Josh asked.

"I've been lying in bed all day staring at nothing," Budda answered, "The only weird thing is that some d-bag named Josh called me and interrupted my little bit of silent meditation time. I'm going to go now."

“Budda, wait!” Josh called right before Budda slammed the phone down, shattering it to pieces with his gigantic slate-blue stone hand.

He sprang up, looking at his arms in front of him. He threw the blankets from his legs and observed them as well. Looking down at himself, he could see that every visible part of him was now made of blue-gray rock.

He quickly swung his legs out of bed, his feet hitting the floor with a loud thunk. He stood up and his entire head blew through the drywall and wood of the low ceiling of his bedroom. He quickly figured he must now be somewhere around eight or nine feet tall.

He ducked his head back down and moved for the door of his bedroom, blowing out the doorway with his now four-foot wide shoulders and his underestimated head height. None of this hurt him, so it would take a while for him to realize what he'd done and attempt to clean it up.

He ran to the bathroom, exploding that doorway as well. He hunched down to look at himself in the mirror. He yelped in surprise.

His face was, as the rest of his body, slate-blue stone. All hair on his body was now gone. His eyes weren't eyes but black orbs which, when he touched them, made a light tink, like a pebble hitting glass. He assumed they were some sort of obsidian. He didn't feel anything as he did this, but his lack of a sense of touch or an active tactile nervous system was as yet unapparent to him.

His hands, both at the edge of the sink as he leaned over, now crushed the porcelain into powder. Curious, he crushed the rest of the sink with ease and pinched the pipes of the faucet closed once they started leaking. He looked down at his hands, noting that they were undamaged by the amazing thing he'd just done. He ran back into his living room, further demolishing his bathroom door, and grabbed the phone in that room.

He obliterated the number pad (and the rest of the phone for the most part) as he attempted to call Josh back.

“Dude,” Budda said as Josh picked up, “Something weird is definitely going on.”

Kurt had also called in to quit that morning. He was the one who put the idea into Budda's head. Working in an office just didn't have the appeal of living off the government's generous settlement for the rest of his life. It would give him a better chance to work on his hobbies, which is why on the way back to Kurt's small house, the car he and Jess had been given made a rather long detour to a music equipment store on the edge of the city.

He figured with all this time and money, he might finally be able to put up a semi-professional recording studio in his basement. He wanted to charge cheap rates so that lesser-known bands, as he had once been a part of, would have an easier time getting their music out there.

He knew just what he wanted and finally had the capital to buy it. It now sat in boxes on his basement floor along with a book about home studio construction. He cracked his knuckles and dove right in.

Without using the book, the studio came together quickly. He attributed the speed of this assembly to the fact that he had experienced hooking up a large sound board before. He didn't think a project this large would be so intuitive and easy to put together. As he touched each component, it seemed as though he knew exactly what to do to get it to perform at its maximum. He even started to get ideas about how to boost output or increase efficiency. He wondered when he had become so handy.

It had been about three hours. He was satisfied with everything and figured he should give it a test run.

As he lifted the cover of the used laptop he'd purchased to tie everything together, a strange sensation pulsed through him. He would later describe it as feeling like a sponge. He was absorbing the knowledge from the computer. Every file, every program was drawn into his brain for instantaneous analysis, copied, and saved. He had just absorbed hundreds of gigabytes worth of data.

He did not yet realize what exactly he had done. It accumulated so suddenly that he could not react. He knew what he possessed and immediately set about doing something with it.

He shook it off and continued with turning the computer on. He found that he had mastered the complex sound-editing program as well as the operating system, programming languages, and technical knowledge. He felt that this was taking too long and had a sudden realization that he could build a much better computer than this piece of junk. He realized that he was calling a computer which had been top-of-the-line for music production a piece of junk and didn't care. He opened the back panel, grabbed his soldering gun, and went straight for the motherboard.

"What are you doing?" asked Jess.

"Well," Kurt said without looking up, "I've been setting up my studio and I got to thinking that this computer needs to be optimized in order for everything to function at peak. Shouldn't take me long to soup this thing up."

"I need your help with something," she said.

"Can it wait like twenty minutes?" Kurt asked.

"This is serious," Jess said, "I need your help now."

"Just give me a min..." Kurt stopped as he looked up. He expected to see her standing at the bottom of the basement stairs, from where her voice seemed to be coming.

He looked around the room, no sign of her.

"Jess?" he called.

"Yes?" she answered, still nowhere to be seen.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm upstairs," she said, "I'm in the bedroom. I'm sort of incapacitated. I need your help."

"How are you doing this?" he asked.

"Telepathy, I think," she said, "It's really hard right now, though. Could you please come up and help me?"

Kurt ran up the stairs and found her lying face up on their bed, blood was trickling from her nose. She was breathing rapidly and shaking as though she were having a seizure.

"Oh my god," he said, "Jess, what's happening?"

"Voices," she muttered, actually speaking to him now, "So many voices."

"I'm going to call for help," Kurt said, grabbing his cell phone from the top of their dresser.

He staggered backwards as suddenly he had knowledge of all the intimate workings of the device. His contact list had been downloaded into his head. He knew how to program for a smart phone. He knew how it was constructed and how it worked in the most detailed way possible. He could build a cell phone from scratch. All this occurred to him instantly.

He knew he had to get help. Without touching anything, the phone began to dial 911. This was interrupted, however, by an incoming call from Justin. Kurt answered, speaking through the device with his mind.

"Now isn't a good time, man," he said, "Jess is in some serious trouble."

"What's happening?" Justin asked, sounding very serious.

"She says she's hearing voices," Kurt said, "She was talking to me with telekinesis or something."

"Telepathy," Justin corrected him, "Quick, put her on the line."

Kurt held the phone to Jess's ear.

"Jess," Justin said while Kurt eavesdropped as the signal channeled through his mind, "If you can hear me, darling, try to take deep breaths and concentrate on me and only on me."

She did as he said. Justin offered more calming words of encouragement until finally she stopped shaking, her nose stopped bleeding, and she was able to sit up in bed. After ten minutes, she seemed almost normal again.

"Ok," Justin said, "I'm assuming you both can hear me right now and I'm also assuming you already know what's going on."

"No," Kurt said.

"Superpowers," Jess said, "I can see inside your mind, Justin. You're calling to ask if we have superpowers."

"No sense in asking at this point, I suppose," Justin said, "Look, I'm trying to get everyone together at my place. We all need to talk."

"This makes no sense in reality," Emma shouted, "There's no such thing as superpowers, there's no such thing as some mystery ooze that can grant them, and this is not some kind of comic book origin story."

The entire group of them, including Steph, looked at her in utter disbelief. Justin's hair smouldered and remained smoke. Budda's now gigantic form looked like it was chiseled out of a piece of blue slate. Her tirade to them all meant only one thing:

"What kind of denial are you in, exactly?" Justin said, "You realize this is happening. You've seen it all with your own eyes. This is not a dream. This is not a hallucination. This is real."

He waved his hand through his hair, causing it to stir but not to stray.

"This is real," he said, creating a fireball in his hand, then extinguishing it.

"This," he continued, pounding on Budda's chest, "Is real."

"This," Josh imitated, "Is real."

He touched Emma on the thigh and jolted her into the air with a static shock. She rolled her sleeves over her arms and started slapping at him.

"Seriously, though," Justin said, "I know it's hard to wrap our heads around. It's something that isn't supposed to exist. It's the stuff we read about in comics or see in movies. We just have to get used to the idea that these things are now very real."

"I'm confident that we can make it past that," said Kurt, "The problem is going to be hiding it from the public. If people you like this or realize that any of us are using superpowers, they're going to freak out. Not to mention we were told by some serious government spooks not to draw attention to ourselves."

"They said not to talk about the accident in public," Mike argued, "They didn't say we had to lead sheltered lives from now on."

"Just asking," Justin interjected, "But how many people do we all typically interact with. I mean, we're all sort of cynical antisocial bastards. We don't usually associate with anyone but each other and maybe a few others outside of this room. If we just keep living our lives, I don't think there's going to be much of an issue with us being out in the public eye."

"I'm still in school," said Jess, "But, I still look normal, so it shouldn't be a big deal."

Budda shot her a dirty look. Justin sighed, but gave her the benefit of the doubt. Kurt pointed at Justin and began speaking.

"You're going to have a problem," said Kurt, "So is Budda. You two had physical effects to go along with your abilities. How are either of you ever going to get around?"

"I own many hats," Justin said, "Most of them do an ok job of hiding the smoke."

"What about me?" Budda asked.

"Don't any of you read comics?" Justin said, "I can't possibly be the only one who immediately thought of the reverse-costume costume."

"Meaning?" Kurt asked.

"Ben Grimm, Fantastic Four," Justin said, "Big rock guy who wears a heavy trenchcoat and a fedora every time he goes out so people don't realize he's different. We do a bit of that, maybe cover up the face some, Budda should be fine."

"We're gonna have to go to the big and tall shop," Budda said, "The only thing I fit into were these button-down track pants and this stocking cap. Nothing else in my closet fits anymore."

"If we're going to do this," Kurt said, "We've got to know each other's capabilities."

"Wait, wait, wait," Mike said, waving his hands, "Do what?"

"Be superheroes," Kurt said.

The room went silent as everyone stared at him.

"We all assembled to talk about powers," Mike said, "You're telling me that none of you thought of this?"

"You're falling into it," Justin said, shaking his head.

"Falling into what?" Kurt asked.

"The trope," Justin said, "We've all been conditioned by pop culture and movies to think that becoming a superhero is the obvious next step to gaining powers. We've been Uncle Ben'd by every comic book, movie, and novel we've ever read about people who suddenly gain power to think that because we have this, we've got some great responsibility to live up to."

"Well," said Budda, "Don't we?"

"No," Justin said, "We don't have to do anything but lay low and continue to live our lives."

"I agree," Mike said, "I've got a business. I can't afford to shut up shop and join the circus."

"We should do something good with this stuff," Kurt continued, "I don't care how many stereotypes or 'tropes' you think we're falling into. It's the right thing to do."

"Except it's not," Justin said, "Vigilantism is illegal and frowned upon in real life."

"I've always wanted to be a hero," said Josh, "I'm with it, I say we give it a try."

"You're going to put your life on the line for strangers?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Josh said.

"You're going to stop violent crime?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Josh said.

"You're willing to take a bullet to defend the innocent?" Justin asked.

"Well," Josh said, trailing off.

"My point exactly," Justin said, "While Budda may be bulletproof – and, I stress, may be – the rest of us are decidedly not. We are not knife-proof or blunt-object-proof or fist-proof. This is not to mention that we live in a relatively calm city. There aren't any serial murderers or supervillains. No one is on the lamb from the cops and, if they are, they're usually caught by simple police detective work. There won't be a need for our level of power in the local crime fighting community. It's just overkill."

"There will be something, someday," Kurt said, "When that day comes don't you want to be able to help? And, until then, why couldn't we patrol and keep the streets clean. Come on, man, you're the comic book nerd. This is supposed to be your life-long fantasy fulfilled!"

Justin sighed and sat down, putting his hands over his face.

"I'm still in agreement with Justin," Mike said, "We're severely overpowered for petty crime. We won't be able to prevent anything like arson or murder because we can't predict the future. We might be able to track people down and bring them to justice or whatever, but we're going to be overlapping the cops – you know, the people who actually get paid to protect the innocent and uphold the law."

"Guys, look," Jess said, standing up and looking very frustrated, "I understand what everyone's thinking, not just because I can actually read your thoughts, but because I am split as to what to do with this stuff. I'm not very experienced. Justin, Mike, Josh, you guys play role-playing games and stuff, I'm going to need a lot of help figuring out how this works and what I can actually do which is why I don't think we should talk about any of this superhero stuff until we know what we're doing."

"What if I make some innocent person's head explode? What if Justin throws a fireball and misses and burns a house down? What if Budda punches someone into oblivion because he doesn't know his own strength?"

"Worst I could do is give someone a welt from a static shock," Josh said.

"Doesn't matter," Jess said, "You just haven't found your full potential yet. None of us have. This is like day one-point-five of us having these abilities and it's too soon to even have this discussion on the table. It took a lot for me to admit that I was psychic to you guys because I knew that you knew about this stuff, even if fictional, and that you'd be afraid of me. I'm here because I now have a super ability and, as strange as it is, you guys are the experts because you've role played characters like this before. I'm here because I need help, not because I want to run off and club purse-snatchers over the head."

"She's right," Budda said, "I don't know my own strength. I've been crushing everything I touch which is why Steph's been doing everything for me. I don't eat anymore, I don't sleep anymore, and I can't feel things anymore. I need support to help me get through this part or I'm going to go insane. I don't need to be fighting crime."

"Thank you for talking sense," said Justin, "We don't need to go looking for trouble when we have so much here."

"But we will someday," Budda says, "I'm with Kurt. I don't think this should be pushed aside and used for nothing. My life is going to be very different now. If my problem can be someone else's solution, so be it."

"Cliché," Justin said with a dismissive wave, "All of this. It's too familiar. We cannot fall into this trap. It's like someone's writing this story and they just want everything to happen in a way that would set us up as a superteam. Next thing you know, there will be a villain out of the other victims who we're going to have to fight."

The room turned to him and stayed silent for a moment.

"That's actually not a bad idea," Kurt said.

"No, it's a horrible idea," Justin said, "It's horrible and stupid and we don't need it. I'm not about to get shoehorned into some corny comic book drama."

"You don't have to," Mike said, "This is real life. Like you said before, we keep our heads down and we stay out of this lifestyle."

"But, what if," Kurt said, "What if someone isn't so complacent? What if one of those other victims decides to use their power for evil?"

"Now you're just antagonizing me," Justin said, "You sound like the to-be-continued page."

"I'm serious, man," said Kurt, "Someone will need to bring them down. Traditional methods would likely be useless."

"Assumption," Justin interjected.

"Assumption or not," Kurt said, "We should be ready for it. And Jess is right, regardless of our individual stances on the hero bit, we should concentrate on learning more about our abilities right now."

"Learned quite a bit, myself," Mike said, "Stayed up all night on the internet looking things up. Determined I have gravity control."

"Wow, that's badass," said Josh.

"Not only can I levitate," Mike said, demonstrating this by standing and floating a few feet from the ground, "But, I can also increase the pull of gravity on objects."

He raised his hand and pointed at a cigarette butt in Justin's ashtray. He levitated it up about an inch before slamming it down. It made a clean hole in the ashtray, the end table, the floor of the room, the apartment below, and one of the industrial mixers in the bakery. Mike, shocked, ran to the hole and peered through it.

"Ok, I guess I could stand to learn a little more about control," he said.

"I hope you know that's not coming out of my deposit," Justin said.

"Keep your mouth shut and it's a deal," Mike muttered.

"If we do go into 'hero training'," Josh said, "Where the hell are we supposed to do it? We don't exactly have a Danger Room or anything."

"I have a pretty big coal cellar below the basement of my house," Kurt said, "Rough stone walls, nothing to write home about. I keep some of my stuff down there. We could clear it out and, with a little work, make it big enough to do whatever we need to do."

"Six of us cooped up with no fresh air and no windows," Justin said, "Coal dust in the air. Sounds like the perfect place to practice pyrokinesis."

"It's not ideal," Kurt said, raising his voice, "But it's something for now."

"Certainly not practical, either," said Justin, "This whole thing is a stupid idea."

"I'm trying to help you here," Kurt shouted, "I'm trying to help all of us."

"You're trying to help all of us run straight out into the streets," Justin shouted back, "Where we'll wind up causing massive collateral damage in order to stop purse-snatchers and car thieves!"

Justin's hair sparked and sputtered. Small flames appeared and snuffed out periodically.

"Let's just calm down here," said Jess, "Clearly, there are some issues which will need hammered out eventually. For right now, you can both agree that we need to work on training and control before we do anything else, right?"

"Yes," said Kurt.

"I guess," said Justin, his hair calming down and returning to its constant smolder, "Really, I don't agree with any of it. It feels like this is some kind of train that we can't get off. We're stuck on the track of this origin story and we have to wait until it plays out. Being a comic book nerd in this situation is both helpful and awful because I can see everything coming."

Justin's cell phone rang.

"Including this call from the hospital, about Char," he said, tears forming in the corners of his eyes, "Which is sure to be some of the worst news I'm ever going to hear."

He watched from the rooftop across the street, lined up perfectly with the curtain-free third floor windows of the living room. The fat, goateed, nerdy one with the smoking head fell to his knees and cried. The one with the designer clothes and the auburn hair moved to comfort him first, followed by the rest. Even the guy who was a big blue rock man moved in to hug the group as most of them were now sobbing openly, embracing each other.

He laughed as the sadness kicked in. He almost couldn't contain himself. He was sure anyone out on the street on this cold night would hear him but he didn't care. He wasn't afraid of anything, least of all getting caught laughing on a rooftop. The only thing he cared about was that the eight people in the living room across the street didn't realize he was there. The funniest part was that no matter how hard he laughed and no matter how much attention he would draw to himself, they would never look in his direction because their sadness drew them instantly inward on each other.

His finely tuned sense of hearing caught every sob, every utterance of an apology, every expression of woe and mourning. He thought this made it even more hilarious.

He was a purveyor of schadenfreude. It was part of his job. He was conditioned for it from the moment he started with the program. Never, though, had it been this funny.

After getting his laughter out, he thought better of the situation. He wiped the tears from his eyes, still chuckling, realizing that a very large bald man on a rooftop in a tight black jumpsuit in the middle of the night laughing hysterically, even maniacally, would probably be something about which people would be concerned.

"13-A," said a deep, calm voice in his ear piece, "This is Control. Report."

He still needed a moment to catch his breath. His ears were still picking up the ongoing wails from the living room and he had to stifle another fit of laughter. He coughed a few times before the voice began again.

"13-A," it said, "This is Control. Please respond."

He got a handle on himself and tapped at the large metal bracer on his wrist before responding.

"Control, this is 13-A," he said through a thick southern accent, "Reckon they got the message. Awaiting further instructions."

"13-A, Control," said the voice, "Phase one complete. Return to base at your earliest convenience."

"Copy," he said.

He took another moment to compose himself and took one parting look through the window, smirking as he crouched down before shooting off the roof like a rocket into the night sky and flying himself back to base.