

Part1: Powerless

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To John,
The only superhero I have ever known.

Jacinta and Oisín,
My reason for being.

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CHAPTER ONE

White knuckled, Lee gripped the armrests of his chair – the centrepiece of his virtually empty apartment. He turned the volume of the ballgame on the TV up to full to help drown out the abrasive noises coming through the ceiling, but they became increasingly difficult to ignore. Lee could feel his heart rate speeding. This wasn't a new situation to be in, but neither was it one that he would ever get used to. He and his brother, Tom, had been brought up alone by their dad, so his experience of arguing parents was based purely on the friends he had visited, which admittedly was few and far between. But even so, he knew that the heart-wrenching cries of the young woman upstairs, accompanied by the ominous baseline of her husband's terrorizing taunts was not normal in any household.

Lee tried to block it out and focus on his plans for the day. It was his day off and the pressure was on to do something with it, to be productive before the onslaught of his job at the local newspaper weighed him down. Tomorrow he would have a mountain of articles to fact check and proof read before they would inevitably be scrapped for a nice family-friendly story. But he already felt weighed down. A day to celebrate his life. Yeah, maybe for some, but for him it had always felt like celebrating the death of his mother. Because let's face it, if he hadn't been born she would still be alive. Lee let his head fall back onto the cushion behind him and redirected his brain down a different route. He knew what he got like when he became lost in these thoughts. His problems with control were hard to mask, especially when idiots like the guy upstairs were concerned. Just as his heartbeat calmed the sudden sound of fist striking plaster jerked his head up. He listened carefully as the silence coming from upstairs spoke volumes to him.

Lee knew how this normally went. She had done something, probably pathetically

inconsequential and her husband had exploded, no doubt taking his own self esteem issues out on her. Usually it was just shouting and crying and the odd door slamming, but he knew it was a more serious situation. There was always more going on than he might guess from the shouting he heard. He had seen the subtle pull of a sleeve over a bruised wrist as they passed in the corridor and the way her head hung a little lower when she walked behind her husband. She would probably be quite attractive if she washed her hair and pulled it back from her face, but Lee never looked for too long, for fear of what he might do to her. He didn't even know her name, but he'd heard her mutter her husband's name, Jimmy, in a quiet childlike voice often enough. There was no knowing what he might be capable of, and all too often, as Lee had learned on the playground, people only showed their powers when you least expected it. She must have a defensive power, he had told himself, thinking that surely a woman would protect herself when faced with an abusive man, if she could.

The walls must be paper thin, he thought, as the sounds of her whimpering drifted down to him. He could hear her husband saying something, but his voice was so deep he couldn't quite tell exactly what. But this time she answered him back and the response was instant. Perhaps a vase thrown or a shattered plate, but the sound of it clattering against the wall made Lee rise from his seat, his heart beating in his ears. With knees slightly bent and fists clenched, he was ready to move. Today there was a shadow resting over him and if this idiot next door wanted to push him, then he deserved to feel the full force of his fury.

A guttural scream propelled him to the door, but he ambled up the stairs and nervously knocked on the door, knowing there would be a confrontation but not knowing what really lay on the other side.

Lee continued to knock, muttering out loud, "H... Hello!" There was no response "Is everything ok in there?" Again his question was only met by silence. Filling up with an equal measure of confidence and rage Lee now banged on the door and assertively shouted, "Open

up!”

Ignored again, Lee reached his hand down to try the handle on the door. Locked. The loud crash of what could only be a small woman onto a piece of furniture kicked Lee into action. Rage overwhelmed him and any hesitance dropped away as his instincts took over and he became a passenger to his own training. Planting his foot on the ground Lee raised his other leg, leaned back and kicked the door clean off its hinges. His keen eyes saw everything as he took in the scene unfolding before him. The place was a complete mess, whisky and beer bottles littered the living area. He entered the apartment and followed the abusive screams to the kitchen. Pushing open the door, his eyes moved straight to the girl cowering on her knees, a clump of her hair caught in Jimmy’s fist as he bent over her screaming into her face.

The intensity of the fight blinded Jimmy to the intruder in their home, allowing Lee to make his move before the neanderthal had a chance to put up his defences. Lee moved behind him, placing one knee in the centre of his back and sweeping his elbow under the guy’s arm and neck, holding him there as he released the hair his hand was clutching onto. Quickly the woman pushed herself along the floor, with her back to the wall, staring at this quiet yet familiar stranger in her home. Lee watched her move away before he made his next move, but Jimmy was one step ahead of him. Out of nowhere a mug came flying at his head. He ducked just in time but felt it splintering into pieces as it hit his shoulder.

He looked around the room trying to gauge if there was a fourth person in there with them, but instead the refracted light of the tail of an electric whip caught his eye as it lassoed a vase, throwing it towards Lee.

Pushing Jimmy to the floor, Lee landed a kick powered by the full weight of his body into the centre of his chest, giving himself a moment to work out what was going on.

The refracted electric strip of light appeared again, this time tossing a small table in his

direction, but Lee had the chance to see the source of the light – Jimmy – or more specifically, Jimmy’s wrist. So this was his power. He kept his distance, still unsure of the extent of this ability. He’d never seen anything like it before, but then again, everyone’s power was always slightly different.

Jimmy paused for a moment as the pain of Lee’s kick still tremored through his torso, but within a flash was hauling his body upright, taking in Lee with one long sweeping gaze.

“What the HELL are you doing here?!” he yelled, his voice like gravel. Turning to his wife with a disgusted sneer, his voice sank a notch lower, “Have you been talking to this one as well, you’re pathetic!”

She looked between the two men and pushed her body further into the wall, seeking solace in its hard protection against her back. The light flickered around her, ever so slightly. Lee kept his body turned towards Jimmy, aggression screaming from every muscle, but moved his head ever so slightly, watching the air around the woman flicker. A forcefield, it’s got to be. Well, at least he wouldn’t have to worry about protecting her, as he beat the life out of her husband. She must really love this idiot if she didn’t even use her own power to protect herself from him. Maybe that’s what love did to you though. He focused his eyes on Jimmy, shaking off the melancholy thoughts and tuning into the obscenities he was shouting at his wife. He could almost see the pain hit her as each word landed, the forcefield offering no protection from them.

Jimmy whipped his arm towards Lee and a ribbon of light passed across the room, wrapping around Lee’s waist, pinning his arms to his side. The harder he fought the tighter it squeezed.

“Shut your whimpering,” he shouted at his wife. “As soon as I’ve dealt with this interfering pansy, you’ve got a lesson to learn.” His lip curled as he looked her up and down. “And I’m gonna enjoy beating it into you.” Her fingernails dug into the carpet underneath her as

she looked down into her lap.

The ice in his voice sent a jolt through Lee's body and with a slight twist he managed to slip his thumb out from under the lasso. His hand followed, allowing him to break free, but Jimmy was quick to move, firing objects at him one after the other. As Lee showed no visible ability yet, Jimmy seemed to gain in confidence as he tried again to restrain him, but there was no denying that Lee was nimble. He whipped his arm, sending the jet of light across the room and around Lee's thigh, twisting up his body. Lee was pinned to the spot, sweat breaking out in beads on his forehead and his eyes darting around the room looking for a weapon, an escape, anything. Jimmy slowly moved towards him, a vicious glint in his eye that said he was used to getting his own way, eventually.

"This is a useful little weapon, isn't it? I find it particularly useful for making people pay attention to me. In fact... I might hold you there a little longer, so you get a front row view of the lesson I have in store for Beth here." His body shuddered as if with laughter, but no noise escaped his lips.

Seething with disgust and anger; every bone in his body, every muscle fibre ached to get hold of this primitive tyrant. But as Jimmy was delivering his speech, Lee had been working his phone free from its protective rubber covering, and held it in his hand waiting for the perfect moment. Jimmy's confidence grew as Beth's whimpers turned into sobs and he partially turned his back to Lee. He bent the rubber case around his hand, using it in a slicing motion, moving through the path of the electric lasso, cutting off its beam for a second, long enough for him to break his way out of its hold.

Before Jimmy had a chance to react, Lee had thrown himself on him, reigning down punches as he fell to the floor. He pinned him down with his knees and channelled all his anger into teaching this idiot a real lesson. As each punch landed he felt Jimmy weaken, until finally there was no resistance at all, yet still Lee's fist pummelled down into his face and chest. He

moved his arms, one after the other, hearing and seeing nothing, not even the screams of Beth as she watched her abusive husband fall into unconsciousness.

His punches slowed and he raised his fist back to deliver another, only to see Beth's head and shoulders move into focus, bent over her husband's body. He paused for a second, seeing the light around her flicker as her protective force field went up, surrounding her. But it wasn't just her she was protecting; she was also surrounding her husband.

Lee's eyebrows knitted together as he blinked, trying to understand. Beth tentatively looked up, fear in her eyes as she waited to see what Lee would do next. His lips tried to form words, but he didn't know what to say. Instinctively he wanted to apologise, but this idiot deserved the beating. If he hadn't come upstairs, who knows what he would have done to Beth. But as he looked at her, cowering over her husband's limp figure, lying on the floor, the bruises already forming, he knew what she saw. He'd seen that look in people's eyes before. To her the devil she knew was a safer choice over the devil that was Lee.

All rage, anger and confidence drained from him with one exhaled breath. Feeling a deep sense of deflation and numbness Lee turned and made for the door. Passing through the doorway he reached down and gripped the handle. Pulling it from the ground and placing it in back in the frame he had kicked it from so violently moments before, leaving Beth and her abusive excuse of a husband to their privacy and to make the inevitable phone call to the cops to report what he had just done.

Walking down the stairs, opting not to return to his apartment, he left the building to seek a vantage point to await the influx of cops coming for him. Crossing the street Lee walked to the corner of the block where his favourite coffee shop was. Going inside, and sitting by the window he could see both up and down the entire block. There he quietly waited for either the waitress to come and take his order or for the cops to come and arrest him. Resigning himself to whichever came first, he knew it was out of his hands. He was, after all, powerless.

CHAPTER TWO

Teary eyed and irritated, Tom sat in the kitchen waiting for his father to return from the car. Unable to focus on the task before him, yet he continued to persevere. His eyes ached, forcing him to stop and clear the tears using the sleeve of his newly-bought shirt. Forgetting himself, he used his hand to clear the moisture from his eyes. This only made the pain worse.

Returning from the car with the brown paper bag in hand, Philip entered the kitchen. Taking one look at his son, a smile began to bend his lip. Through blurred vision Tom looked back at his father, and began to laugh heartily.

“You know how much I hate chopping onions.”

Both men continued to laugh, Tom walking over to the sink, he grabbed a cloth and cleared his eyes. Philip took his place at the table and continued to chop.

“I know you hate chopping onions, but Lee loves them in his birthday meal.”

Philip had prepared every meal for his sons when they were kids and was accustomed to chopping onions and the stinging aroma did not bother him at all. Grabbing the big wooden spoon from beside the stove Tom took Philip’s place at the big pot of bubbling sauce and began to stir.

Philip and Tom both knew Lee’s struggle with his birthday and always tried to make it about him and not his mother. It was now a tradition that they would prepare a simple understated meal for all three of them. It was the only real tradition they still shared besides the obvious festive celebrations. Philip had his own tradition for this day, ever since the boys were young. Rising an hour before the rest of the house, he would quietly take his key and slip out. The boys never questioned what he did as they always knew. It was an uncomfortable reminder

for Lee. Philip would come back a little emotional, but always with ingredients for both a good breakfast and Lee's favourite dinner. Lying in bed until the aroma of breakfast wafted through the house, the boys only arose when the sounds of plates hitting the table rang out. The breakfast tradition only ended when the boys moved out; Tom for basic training and Lee for college, but the custom of dinner lived on.

It dawned on Philip that he had forgotten one bag of groceries in the trunk. "Would you mind popping out and grabbing that last bag from the boot? I'll keep an eye on the sauce."

Tom replied. "No problem, just make sure it doesn't stick!" Philip, irritated by the comment, stated, "It's nearly thirty years I've been making this for your brother, and not once has it stuck. I don't intend on starting today."

Tom was a little taken aback by this but realised that as tough as this day was for Lee, it was always going to be a hell of a lot tougher for his Dad. So without snapping back he took the big spoon out of the pot, sitting it beside the oven once more and left the room.

Philip now finished chopping the onions and turned his knife to the carrots. Muttering to himself, "God sake Philip, it's not Toms fault. He's just trying to help." He knew he shouldn't have snapped at him for something so trivial. He began to think back to the real reason he was tetchy on this day.

On the day Lee was born, his parents had been coming home from the hospital, where his mum had been for her nine month check-up. The day had been normal for the young couple, who were expecting their second child, having already had a boy two years before. Josephine dropped her husband to work in the hospital and went on to the school where she taught English.

At three thirty in the afternoon she finished up correcting the children's homework, putting away their projects at school and went to the hospital to have her scan. Meeting

Philip in the reception he brought Josephine down the long corridor of maternity wards where they met the obstetrician. Dr. Cruz was a colleague of Philip's and looked after Josephine during her first pregnancy. As the doctor performed the scan Josephine's eyes were fixated on the screen as she held Philip's hand. Dr. Cruz made the image of the foetus clear on the screen and turned to Josephine, "Do you want to know the sex?"

Josephine hesitated. "No, I want it to be a surprise."

Turning to Philip she could see a huge smile on his face and she exclaimed. "Aw no fair, you can tell! Can't you?"

Philip simply chuckled, brushed his hand through her hair, kissed her on the head and told her, "We'll just have to wait and see." Getting their keepsake picture, they then left.

Philip drove, as his wife was tired, driving the same way home that he had done every day for the past five years. Some raindrops were still hitting the windscreen from an earlier downpour. Philip hit the wipers to clear any residual drops, muttering to himself, "I need to replace these wipers," as they weren't clearing the windscreen on the first wipe but rather taking at least three to clear his view. Josephine wasn't paying too much attention as they drove down the streets that felt like home, past the playground where they would walk Tom, their first child, in his pram.

She could vaguely recognize the sound of Philip's voice in the background, happily talking, but her mind was miles away. She was picturing her little girl or boy in her arms, sitting against the stomach that it now lay inside. She imagined pushing him or her down this road; chasing behind them as they learnt to walk; watching them carefully as her two children played together in the playground. In a matter of minutes she had visualized the first decade of her unborn child's life. She thought about the friends they would make, the games they would play; the attitude they would have. Would it be a sunny happy child? A melancholy

child, always fretting?

“So I sold the house and we’re moving to Hawaii...” Philip looked across at Josephine, knowing exactly what she was thinking about and enjoying teasing her anyway.

“Hang on, what?!” she exclaimed, suddenly pulled out of her thoughts.

“You’re miles away again. What is it this time? Dreaming of the unnatural musical ability he is bound to have?” he winked at her and briefly placed his hand on her leg, squeezing.

“Ha-ha, I’m sorry Philip. It’s just... all the possibilities!” the twinkle in her eye that had appeared on that day all those months ago when she first told Philip that she was pregnant had only become brighter and stronger. She was a wonderful mother to Tom and he couldn’t wait to see her with both children in her arms.

Pulling onto the highway they went to collect Tom from the childminder’s. As they drove along the short stretch of road there was a large lorry carrying bulk metal in front of them.

Being a cautious man, he kept his distance as they drove. Looking ahead, Philip saw a small removal van, the kind used to move apartment furniture, join the highway and merge alongside the lorry. Approaching their exit, the removal van veered suddenly and violently in front of the lorry, as if to avoid something on the road. The warm smile that hadn’t left Philip’s face since they’d seen the scan vanished, replaced by intense concentration.

The van caused the lorry to jack-knife and it tipped onto its side. The horrendous noise of metal on metal and screeching tires was enough to send Josephine into a panicked hysteria, torn between clutching onto the door beside her and wrapping her arms around her unborn baby, but Philip was a meticulous man and had kept his distance. He had enough

room to manoeuvre out of danger.

Unfortunately, the driver behind Philip wasn't as adept and careened into the back of his car, causing him to be thrust into the back of the lorry and allowing the bulk metal to rip apart the car and open it up like a cheap piece of tin. Philip had been knocked out.

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Gradually starting to wake, feeling a combination of cold rain and warm blood cascading from his face, he found himself alone in the car. He could not see his beloved wife. He strained to get out of the car, eventually freeing himself from the seat and crawling out through the window. His hearing and vision had been impaired from the violent impact he'd taken to the head. All noise was inaudible, as if underwater, and his vision was blurred and fuzzy.

Struggling to his feet, he limped heavily on a badly damaged leg that had been twisted in the wreckage. Trying to put the full weight of his body on his leg, it simply couldn't take it and collapsed. Lying on the ground unable to move, shock was starting to set in. A horrible combination of burnt rubber, fuel and oil filled his nose. The scent acted like smelling salts and revived him. Feeling panicked he began to look for Josephine. Rolling onto his front he looked into the car, but she was not there. With quick stares his eyes darted all around, but he was unable to lay his eyes on her. The thought of his best friend and life partner alone, scared and quite possibly injured gripped onto his heart. And his child. His unborn child. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he frantically searched for them.

A moment of clarity hit him and he bolted to his feet, ignoring the pain that seared through his body like a hot poker on cold flesh. Dashing towards the rear of the car, he rounded the trunk, not noticing a loose piece of metal. Treading on it, it offered him no grip to the ground. Once again he collapsed as the smooth wet metal slid from under foot.

As he hit the ground, he could see round the side of the car to the passenger side. There she was, struggling to breathe, only managing to take short sharp breaths and struggling to cling onto consciousness. For a moment all he could do was stare at her, terrified of the reality of the situation. Labouring back to his feet, he went to tend to her. As he moved closer, the full extent of her injuries were hidden as she lay holding her open jacket across her chest.

“Are you okay, Joey?”

No words left her mouth and she simply pulled open her jacket. Philip’s eyes widened, rising his hand to his mouth at the horror of what he was presented with. Sticking through her blood soaked blouse was a large piece of jagged metal puncturing her chest.

There was a large bend in the metal that Philip put straight with ease. Holding her gaze steady with his, he pulled the metal from her chest to free her from the wreckage. Josephine howled out in pain. Pulling the metal he could feel the jagged edges rubbing, tearing against his wife’s insides. The sound of Josephine shrieking and the feeling of his wife’s bones on the metal were unbearable to him. Instead he tried to focus on the task at hand, saving the life of his wife and child. Biting back tears he looked down at her chest. The jagged metal left an open wound, but her ability to heal was drained by the later stages of pregnancy. There would be no way back from this. But he couldn’t think of that. He couldn’t face it. Putting pressure on the laceration he tried to stem the bleeding, all the while knowing in his heart that there was little hope for his beloved. Philip looked into the eyes of his wife and did something he had never done in all the years they were together. He lied. She looked up at him and struggled to speak.

Philip reassuringly spoke to her in hushed tones. “It’s ok, you are going to be fine, you need to save your strength.”

Knowing she was hearing lies and choosing to ignore the comfort Philip was offering, she continued to struggle painfully for speech. Words she searched for would not come easily given the extent of her trauma; she kept trying and eventually forced out the words, “Save my baby.”

Looking into the back seat of the car, Philip reached for his medical bag. Right there in the middle of all that devastation, disarray and through immeasurable heartache, he performed a procedure that had not been done for an age. Taking his scalpel, he cut into his wife. As he cut her open a combination of amniotic fluid and blood poured out. Reaching his hand into her open womb he removed their child. Quickly he pulled off his coat and wrapped it around the newborn child. Teary eyed, devastated and completely numb from shock, he placed the child in his dying wife’s arms. Through his pain he struggled to say, “Look Joey, it’s our little boy.”

Unable to lift her arms to offer her son a cuddle, Josephine simply lay with her son propped up on her dying body, unable to move an inch. Looking at her son for the first time with fading eyes, she pushed out one more word.

“Lee.”

Breaking down, Philip kissed her softly on the lips. As a tear rolled down her cheek she gave one last breath and with that, she died on the side of the road amid all that chaos. Philip was left to deal with the devastation that followed this tragic event. Every morning he woke up to the heartache of knowing the loss of the one person who filled his heart; the only woman he truly loved, the person he expected to grow old with. And as much as he wanted to lie in bed all day, going through photo albums and thinking over moments long since passed with his beloved Joey, he was not able to wallow in this pain, having two young boys to raise and provide for.

Over the coming years he did just that, moving past his own pain and focusing on the two people most important in the entire world to him. He was a caring father who taught his boys the importance of being good and just. At times he was a little hard and strict with his boys, but he always had their best interests at heart.

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Tom returned from the car with the bag in hand. Seeing his father sitting at the table appearing to be uncharacteristically emotional, he entered and took the knife from his hand. He sat in the chair beside him and began to chop. Philip stood up and went to the oven, lifting the wooden spoon once again and plunging it into the pot. After a couple of stirs he began to laugh.

“What’s up?” Tom asked quizzically from the table.

“I guess there’s a first for everything,” Philip proclaimed. The sauce is sticking!” Once again both men laughed.

Tom gathered up all the onions and carrots and dropping them into the pot, told his father, “Don’t worry, you know Lee. He’ll never notice and if he does he won’t say anything.”

CHAPTER THREE

The inevitable wailing of sirens he had expected hadn't come and he was unsure if they would. Were he in Jimmy's position he knew without doubt that he would have reported it. But he wasn't Jimmy.

Beginning to relax, Lee turned his eyes downward to the coffee cup clasped tightly in his hand. What remained of the heat that emanated out from the drink was fading fast, but this didn't seem to bother him, as he slowly sipped on the now lukewarm cappuccino, enjoying the cool froth as he got closer to the bottom of the cup. He contemplated going to the counter to order another, but the option to just sit and reflect won out.

Today was always bittersweet. Well, more bitter than sweet. Every year this day would roll by and he would face an internal rift that weighed heavily on him. Mostly he spent it thinking about his family and hiding the fact that it was meant to be a joyous occasion rather than a sombre one, but for him every year brought with it a small feeling of guilt, a feeling that if today was not his birthday his life might have been very different.

Lee thought back on the life his parents had; it was a life that he could barely imagine, in comparison to his own. But no, it wasn't so much the life that he envied, but the love they shared. Philip and Josephine had been high school sweethearts and had only known love for each other. Josephine was free-spirited with a kind heart and a soft soul that reflected in her outlook on life. She would often be seen tending her garden or painting outside, if the mood took her. She had no illusions of grandeur; she was humble, loving and lived for her family. Philip, in contrast, had quite a regimental upbringing. His father had been a soldier in the war whose special skill was covert sabotage missions, often finding himself behind enemy lines for most of the duration of the war. These skills he imparted onto his son, taking him hunting

high in the woods for days at a time, teaching him how to remain concealed amongst the natural environment and how to conceal his scent using the wind and read the land around him.

Lee spent his younger years listening to his father talk about his grandfather, a man Lee never met but one who would shape his life through the teachings he bestowed upon Philip. Lee listened to his father with a respect that shone through his eyes.

“When I wasn’t out hunting with your granddad, I was learning mechanical skills in the old shed behind the main house. Now it’s a broken down old building, but then it was magnificent. Everything was shiny and all his tools were kept in such order that he could always lay his hand on the tool he was looking for. We spent summer after summer mostly by taking apart pre-war vehicles and restoring them to their former glory.” He paused as his eyes stared ahead, reliving those moments of simplistic joy. “After your granddad died, and I set about working on an engine, I could then - and still can - hear his voice guiding my hand and telling me what to do.”

Philip’s father had seen the horrors of war and although he didn’t want that life for his son, he appreciated that the balance of power was on such a knife-edge that if a war were to flare again, he would want him to be as prepared as possible.

Even though his father was stern towards him and expected a lot from him, he always knew he loved him, even if he had difficulty showing it. Philip chose a selfless life, helping others by becoming a doctor and it was this choice that showed his father he had raised a good man.

His parents seemed polar opposites in many respects, but as a couple they just seemed to work. Their contrasting personalities appeared to balance, shaping the perfect relationship. They had their ups and downs as many young couples did, but both knew that love wasn't

about perfection, but rather it was about compromise. The mutual respect that they had for each other was unwavering and while the heady romance of their youth had settled down to a simmering glow, their mutual respect and admiration meant that they each would happily compromise for the other. They were a sensible couple, who worked hard in their youth to be in a position to start a family and be able to provide a good life for their future.

Lee paused his thoughts and looked down at his hands. His unfinished coffee sat between them and now leant a pale stain to the inside of his cup. He stared down at it as he swirled the inch of liquid around the cup, a heavy sense of melancholy sitting on his shoulders. He thought back further, to a time before his parents were born and even before his granddad was born. Reminiscing on a time where he would have fitted into the world quite normally; a time where evolution wouldn't have been so cruel as to make him feel alone in the world; the only ordinary man in a world of power.

Today's world was very different to the one that Lee dreamt off. And dream he often did. Although practical and hard working by nature, there was something hollow inside him; a feeling that he didn't belong, and try as he might, he couldn't escape this weighty feeling. So he consoled himself with his own thoughts of a world long since gone and the opposite of everything he now lived with. But those dreams always ended too quickly, leaving him with the reality of this life, where everyone is special, where the ability to do incredible things is an everyday occurrence and each person is gifted with an ability beyond the realm of what is comparable. In this world a child might have the ability to throw a car through the air; a person does not necessarily need a plane for the ability to fly; the most difficult mathematical problems can be solved in a matter of seconds by high school students.

In this world, evolution took a major leap forward, unlocking the full potential of the human mind. This potential manifests itself differently in every being on this planet, gifting people with powers, an inherent concealed ability that manifests itself either through a

physical capability or a mental ability. With these abilities there are a few effects on the human body, like physical exhaustion. It is easy to exhaust one's power; the veiled capability of an individual tends to last about an hour or so. After a prolonged splurge of hidden virtue, an individual is left weakened, drained and in need of rest; thus for every person's strength there is a corresponding weakness as unique to the individual as their abilities.

This is a world that knows only peace. There are no crimes of any significance other than basic crimes any good beat cop could handle; no wars at all. This is a world where good and evil co-exist and have found equilibrium for survival, but this was not always the case. Crime tried to take over, with evil trying to take advantage of newfound strengths. People could simply walk into banks and take money, should they choose to.

People who choose to murder and rape can never be seen committing crimes. Power-hungry leaders waged wars against weaker countries to steal natural resources and enslave the people as victims of war. Good people had to rise up against tyranny and a world war was fought.

A young boy stood back from the table behind Lee, scraping his chair noisily along the floor as he did so, waking Lee from his reverie. He licked his lips and rolled his shoulders back, once more taking note of his surroundings. People going about their business in the normal way and yet none of them were normal. You could never tell what any one individual's strength or weakness would be, although that did work to Lee's advantage. He considered each person in the little café he sat in, imagining what their strength could be and how it might affect their day-to-day life. Did anyone else long for a different life as he did? He sighed; looking down at his hands clenched together so tightly the whites of his knuckles glared at him. Slowly he released them, letting the frustration out through his nose. He needed to pull himself together and get on with his day. Yet something stopped him. The desire to carry on and pretend that he didn't want something more,

something that his parents always had, just wasn't there. A flicker of shame settled in his stomach as he admitted to himself that just this once he wanted to wallow a little longer, his mind taking him back to a point where his father began to realise Lee was different.

Being a single father with a full-time job didn't make things easy. His two sons were both regular boys, they were fanatical about sports and would sit together and watch football and wrestling on the TV, often acting out the moves of their favourite wrestlers. Philip would take the boys out for food on the nights where his long hours got the better of him, leaving him reluctant to face the arduous task of cleaning up after dinner, although he actually enjoyed cooking for the boys.

To Lee and Tom this was a welcome treat as Philip only ever had healthy food in the house and the idea of getting a burger and milkshake always seemed like such an exciting prospect. Philip would always allow Lee to order first, turning to him and asking, "What looks good Lee?" But no matter where they went for food, Lee would always look to his brother for guidance saying, "I don't really know, Dad. What you think Tom?" and nearly always Lee would ask for the same as Tom, unless there were mushrooms in it. Lee hated mushrooms and Tom loved them, often ordering extra mushrooms to goad a reaction from Lee.

They fought like normal boys do and had a textbook relationship. When Lee turned ten, his father became aware that he didn't seem to have developed any of his hidden abilities yet. By his twelfth birthday he had still shown no heightened ability and his father grew concerned. He kept a close eye on him and subtly tested him by asking him to do things he couldn't. Testing his strength, he would ask him to lift a box that he had deliberately weighted down. Or when he cut his leg he observed the wound, noticing that he had no accelerated healing. These were the most likely powers for him to have, as they were the powers his parents had. Philip began to see powers in everything he did, hoping to himself that each time he saw something it would be his power.

Philip took Lee and Tom to the local fair and as they strolled along the stalls looking at all the various games and rides, Lee freed his hand from his father's. Philip did not notice this as his eyes were gazing up to the big wheel. Excited at the prospect of taking his kids on the ride he turned and said, "What do you think boys? Are you game?" But when he looked down only Tom was standing there looking at him. Philip exclaimed, "Where's Lee!"

Tom quickly looked around, not seeing his brother he simply shrugged his shoulders. Philip grabbed Tom's hand and ran back the way they came. If Tom hadn't had the same ability as Philip he may have broken his arm, but with Tom's strength it just felt like Philip was gripping him a little firmer than usual.

Philip didn't have to go too far to find Lee; he came upon a dark stall with the small solitary figure of Lee standing in front of it; the only person giving it any attention. Philip was relieved to see his son safe and became aware of the pressure he was putting on Tom's hand. He loosened his grip and fell to his knee to make sure he hadn't hurt Tom. After a quick examination he knew Tom was fine.

Philip approached Lee, saying sternly "Lee!"

But Lee did not turn.

Philip said again "Lee?" this time placing his hand on the young boy's shoulder. The boy moved his head but did not break his eyes away from what his gaze was fixated upon.

Lee simply said, "Ten thousand, one hundred and eighty seven." Philip did not understand what his son was saying until he looked into the stand and saw a giant glass container full of jellybeans with a sign over it saying 'Guess the amount, Win the Prize'.

"Ten thousand, one hundred and eighty seven," Lee repeated again.

Philip's heart skipped as he reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out some

money so Lee could register his guess and handed it to the woman in the stall.

“How much do you think is in it?” the woman asked Lee.

Once again Lee said, “Ten thousand, one hundred and eighty seven.”

The woman’s face was overcome with surprise. “Aren’t you a clever boy!” She reached for a giant teddy and she handed it to Lee.

Philip took the boys up the big wheel and while the landscape stretched before him, captivating his boys, he could not enjoy the view. He didn’t gaze at the stars as his wide-eyed sons did. Instead he was fixated on *ten thousand, one hundred and eighty seven* and hoped to himself that he had finally discovered his son’s ability.

Packing the boys into the car, he watched in amazement as his little son dragged the teddy bear that was twice his size into the back seat with him and carefully fastened the spare seatbelt around the bear, while Tom hopped into the front.

They were heading home when Philip pulled the car into a gas station to buy some things. The boys thought they were in for a treat when their Dad arrived back with seven large boxes of cereal, something he would never ordinarily allow them to have. When they arrived home Philip sent the boys into the house. Staying behind in the garage, they could hear him tearing the boxes open and pouring the cereal out.

The boys waited by the door and their curiosity spiked. Philip called out, “Lee,” and the two boys entered. Philip looked up at them coming in the door.

“Now Lee, have a look at this...” revealing a large glass vase full to the top with a mixture of the different cereals. “Lee, how much is in the vase?”

He automatically looked to Tom for his input, but before his eyes met Tom’s, Philip interrupted him.

“Lee, take your time and tell me what you think.”

He stared at the container and after a moment he stated, “Eight thousand, six hundred and twelve.”

Philip’s mouth curved with a smile. “Right, now boys, time for bed.” They did as their father asked and they left the room. Philip waited for them to go and then set about counting the contents of the container.

Lee and Tom lay in their beds chatting about what had happened. Lee was hopeful, asking Tom, “What do you think? Do you think I was right?”

“I don’t know, Lee,” Tom replied. “I suppose we will find out tomorrow.”

After all the excitement of the day the boys soon fell asleep. When they awoke they both ran downstairs to find a very tired Philip at the kitchen table sitting over a coffee. Looking at their father without saying anything he could read the question in Lee’s eyes and all he said was, “Not even close.” He laughed to himself at the ludicrousness of the test he had just performed.

Lee’s heart broke as he felt pulled back out of a world he wanted to be accepted into. Sadness set in as he sat thinking he would never have an answer to the question. Philip was surprised by this, seeing the sadness in his little son and decided enough was enough. He could not subtly test him anymore, as his son was becoming aware that he was different. He could no longer waste time taking him to the hospital where he worked and running a barrage of tests to determine if there was anything wrong with his son. All the tests had come back normal. He was a normal happy twelve year old boy, but with one big difference. In a world where the norm is to be different, being less than normal was too hard for a boy of his age to comprehend and deal with.

Philip determined that it would be best for Lee and Tom if no one found out that Lee was different, all the while hoping that Lee was just a late developer. Philip was afraid that if anyone found out that Lee had no ability he would be taken away from him and barbaric experiments would be performed on him. The same experiments that the governments of the past were guilty of. Afraid that his son would be hailed as a missing link from this time to a world that had long passed, he decided to protect his boys. He would have to put a plan into action.

Given Philip's background he was in a position where he could impart onto his sons the skills and lessons his father taught him all those years ago. So from the time Lee was twelve his father trained him; having super strength was a bonus. He started Lee on a fitness routine that he would stick with for the majority of his life, involving daily runs of five miles, two hundred press ups each morning and night, accompanied by the very healthy diet he had always instilled, being a doctor. He trained him to become a skilful fighter through many ancient arts of combat. Most importantly, he instilled the values of what he felt it meant to be a man; the values of honour, discipline, dignity, selflessness and self-reliance.

His brother Tom developed strength just like his father, so physically he didn't need the routine that his brother did, but they would often spar together as kids, Lee learning how to use his brother's momentum and strength against him. Philip decided to educate both his boys, teaching them about the world, about the past and the present, teaching them right from wrong, and giving them the tools to develop terrific minds.

He taught the young boys how to solve equations, puzzles and all about the outdoors; how to track and hunt, how to read the land around them so that they could look at the stars and know exactly where they were and where they had to go. No matter how lost Lee and Tom would be, they would always know which direction to turn, just as Philip's father had taught him.

Philip was at work one day when he got a call from the boys' school asking him to come in, that there had been an incident involving his sons. Automatically Philip assumed that Lee's secret had been found out. Alarmed by this, he grabbed his coat and darted straight out the door. Philip didn't mind running out on his patients for his boys as they were his main priority in life; however the patient that Philip was in the middle of giving a hernia examination to wasn't as amused by the situation, being left behind in the examination room with only his gown to cover his embarrassment.

Making haste, he got to the school and went straight to the office. Sitting outside he found his two sons, each of whom saw him come in, but neither were brave enough to look him in the eye. Philip automatically knew the boys were guilty of something. He entered the principal's office and sat down. The principal, Mr. Pine, greeted Philip at the door with a firm handshake.

"Thanks for coming so soon, Mr. Sapota. Please have a seat."

Sitting down, Philip's fears that Lee had been found out ran through his mind in double time, but he was smart enough to let the principle speak first.

"Mr. Sapota, there are certain things we as teachers can observe. Over time these observations lend themselves to conclusions. For example, having Tom in the school these past few years, it is fairly easy to tell within reason what his ability is."

Philip stood up as anxiety hit. Mr Pine continued. "Don't worry Mr Sapota; this is the same for all the kids who pass through these corridors. In fact there are very few students who pass these halls that I don't get an indication of their gift." Hearing this Philip relaxed and sat back in his chair allowing him to continue.

"Lee is one of those students, for whatever reason his gift has never been..."

Philip interrupted the principal, growing impatient. "Mr Pine. Enough of this circling

the issue. Can you tell me why I'm here?"

Standing up and walking to the window, Mr Pine spoke. "Mr Sapota, today at break a bunch of older kids started picking on Tom. Name-calling, the usual kind of thing. But don't worry, I will be speaking to their parents as well."

Philip was now paying full attention to the principal, heeding his words more intently than before, knowing Tom to be more than capable of physically looking after himself.

"Now the problem wasn't Tom or what was being said to him. In fact, Tom was highly restrained, given my past observations. The reason I called you in, is Lee and how he reacted."

Without realizing it, Philip slipped forward in his seat becoming engrossed in the words the principle was speaking. "Lee saw what was happening to his brother and he did not show the same restraint that Tom did."

Mr Pine hesitated as if to consider the best way to tell Philip what had happened. "Basically Mr Sapota, Lee beat up three students. Not only three students, but they are three of the biggest kids in the school, and two of them are powerful, very powerful. Lee managed to do this without revealing his own ability. I saw this with my own eyes. Now Mr Sapota, I have seen kids pass through these doors for years and I have never seen a child move with this mixture of physical self-awareness and rage. It's clear that your son has been trained physically. Emotionally, I am not so sure!"

Philip took heed of what Mr Pine said, reassuring him that it would not happen again before motioning to leave his office. "If it's okay with you I'd like to take the boys home. I need to have a talk with them."