

Andy's Woodsy Adventure

Chapter 1

It was one of those days when I just wanted to be outside. The sky was blue and there weren't any clouds to be seen. The temperature on the thermometer read close to 70 degrees on this Saturday in early June.

Saturday was normally the only day of the week that I ever got to spend a good bit of time outside behind my house exploring the adjacent woods. I really looked forward to doing this each week because of all the friends I hung out with in there. You see my friends aren't actually those kids in my neighborhood playing games and riding their bikes around with each other. Those guys generally just make fun of me and tend to think I'm rather strange because I talk to the trees and plants and insects and create my own world out there in the woods. But that's ok because I don't think much about them at all once I cross the edge of the grass in my backyard and enter that first row of trees aligning the woods.

My thoughts of those kids quickly evaporated as I raced out my backdoor to begin my weekly adventure. My mother who was busily reading her latest and most likely quite boring romance novel shouted that I needed to be home by 5pm before the door came to a complete close. I quickly glanced down at my red watch that had a lightning bolt in its center to see how much time I had left. It was only 1pm, plenty of time I thought...

It wasn't long before the sticks from fallen branches were crunching beneath my feet as I entered the darker canopy of the surrounding woods. I immediately headed south towards an area that had become my fort of sorts over time. I guess you could say it was more of a solid structure because it was a gigantic odd-shaped rock I had found sitting there deep in the thick of the woods last year. The rock itself was close to 30 feet high and 100 feet wide and at its base lay the place I did most of my exploring and playing. I always wondered how this huge monstrosity got to be in the middle of a forest all by itself. Sometimes I liked to pretend it housed an alien spacecraft either inside or beneath it and other times I imagined wizards used it long ago. But more than not, I just found ways to create my own fantasy world with the rock being at the center of it.

By the time I reached it, I glanced down at my watch again and saw it was already 1:30. Thankfully, I still had plenty of time to do the task I wanted to take on today. I had brought a small shovel to accomplish it because I wanted to dig directly in front of a section on the rock where there were several strange markings. They had always been there since I had first discovered the large boulder and although I had assumed it was just some graffiti made by a few of those neighborhood kids, I had decided I was still going to pretend I was digging for buried treasure.

I had once watched a bunch of workers a few years ago dig out some holes in my backyard when they built our porch, but I never knew how much work it actually was.

"Phew! This is totally exhausting!" I said aloud as if the birds were listening overhead.

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Note to self. Never do a job in life that ever involves digging any huge holes!!!

An hour passed by with me eagerly digging away, which was beginning to take its toll on me since I had yet to find anything interesting at all. I was also covered with dirt from head to toe that I'm sure my mother wasn't going to be all too happy about. While I had dug considerably deeper than I thought I could, I was about to throw my shovel down in sheer frustration when...

"CLAAAAANNNNGGGGGG"....

The sound rang out all around me making my heart suddenly skip a beat.

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At first I thought I was just imagining I had hit something with my shovel. I mean after all there were plenty of small rocks I had come across already in my digging process that had made similar noises. But sure enough, after clearing away enough of the dirt, I discovered a large rectangular piece of metal that reminded me quite a bit of my next door neighbor's outside entrance to their basement. It appeared to be about 4 feet wide and about the same in length.

It was definitely very corroded and I began to wonder if that's all my buried treasure was going to end up being, just some rusty piece of metal that had lay dormant below the earth for years. But as I brushed away the last bit of dirt off the top of it, I noticed something else. There was a small bent piece of metal raised above the rest that looked a lot like a handle to a door.

I'd seen many movies previously in life where someone had discovered some hidden cave or secret passageway and it never seemed to turn out well for those who ever explored any of them. My heart was beating a mile a minute and every rational sense in me said to leave it alone and cover it back up with all that dirt lying around me in piles. But I didn't, almost as if my right hand were on autopilot.

My fingers clasped the cold raised piece of metal and pulled upward while I pondered the thought that it would probably be too heavy for me to lift. Ironically, it was just the opposite. It felt as if I had temporary super strength as I watched the large piece of tarnished looking metal fly straight up in the air and come to a rest against the huge rock wall behind it. A square of darkness was all that remained now in front of me and from what it looked like, several steps descending down into it.

My heart was still racing a mile a minute, but since nothing scary had flown out at me, I could feel it starting to calm down a little. As my fear subsided, anxious curiosity of what lay below me replaced it. I quickly glanced at my watch to see how much time had passed and saw it was only 3pm. I was grateful I still had two full hours to explore. At twelve years old, I really felt like I was a young Indiana Jones ready to take on his first true adventure.

Thankfully, I always carried one of those LED flashlights on my keychain so I knew I wouldn't have to begin it in total darkness. I swiftly clicked it on as I took my first step downward. The gravel and dirt on the steps grinded beneath my shoes and echoed slightly into what I was descending upon. I moved my flashlight left and right with each step I took, counting them aloud as I proceeded.

"1..."

"2..."

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"3..."

"10..."

"15..."

It felt as if the steps were never going to end. I turned around to see the light from where I had entered and it was growing dimmer with each step.

"20..."

"30..."

"31..."

"32..."

"33... *Whoa!!!*"

I fell forward and landed on a cold surface realizing I had finally reached the bottom of whatever it was I had entered. Moving my flashlight around in front of me, I saw there was a large cavernous room made completely of an uneven white rock-like surface, which also appeared to be of the exact same dimensions as the huge boulder that lay right above it. I took my first footstep forward heading into the room when a number "1" abruptly began to glow in a purple light directly beneath my left foot. As I shined my flashlight onto the floor, I noticed the rest of the room appeared to be filled with many more numbers sitting in the center of various odd-shaped tiles. I decided to immediately try stepping on another one, an "8", to see if it too would glow purple, which it did, much to my delight.

You would think a kid like me who loved Indiana Jones so much would have been a lot more cautious having watched all the perils he faced in each of his treasure hunts. But I wasn't being that at all as I hurriedly stepped on a "19" directly to my right. This ended up creating so much of that purple light that my flashlight was no longer needed. After clicking it off, I glanced around me and saw lucky number "77" waiting nearby. As soon as my right foot came to a rest upon it, all of my delight rapidly turned to shock as a wall slammed down to the ground blocking my exit to the steps above.

And if things couldn't have gotten any worse, they did as I watched in horror while each of the numbers I had stepped on suddenly began to extinguish one by one plunging the whole room back into complete darkness...and me into total fear...

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Chapter 3

“AHHHHHHHH!”

“AHHHHHHHH!”

“AHHHHHHHH!”

I screamed at the top of my lungs several times hoping that each might do something, anything, like possibly reopen the entrance to the cave. But nothing happened of course, except for me growing hoarse, and my heart racing quite a bit more. I became totally frozen in fear half expecting to suddenly feel some warm heavy breathing on my cheek.

Note to self. STOP WATCHING SCARY MOVIES IF I EVER MAKE IT OUT OF HERE ALIVE!!!

I frantically fumbled in my pocket for my small flashlight only to hear it crash to the floor due to my hands shaking so badly. Now I had no way of seeing anything other than the thick blackness around me. A few tears dripped from the corner of my eyes as I began to wonder whether I was going to perish in this dark prison. But then I remembered the numbers of the floor and how they lit up in purple each time I had stepped on one of them. Maybe if I just slowly moved in one direction, I'll walk on one again making it re-light?

My left foot slowly crept forward in the direction of where I thought the room's opening had once been. Then I moved my right foot. And then the left again. Surprisingly, a very dim purple glow abruptly appeared. I looked down to see it was the number “8” relit again, which helped me to breathe a small sigh of relief.

While there was still a considerable amount of blackness surrounding me, I was at least able to see my small flashlight lying nearby. I quickly grabbed it and turned it on, grateful not to see any weird creatures staring and snarling at me anywhere in the large cavernous room. After taking a few deep breaths hoping it would stop my heart from feeling like it was going to jump out of my chest, I pondered what to do next.

Somehow these numbers on the floor are a puzzle. But how do they work?

Ugh! I never really liked puzzles much. They always hurt my brain. I fondly remembered one time taking an old Rubik's cube that I had grown tired of trying to solve and peeling its colors off just so that I could put them all back together on each respective side. A smile briefly lit up my face with the thought, and with it thankfully came a spark of inspiration.

Scurrying over to the closest number nearby, I illuminated a “16” after placing my foot upon it. I rapidly then jumped onto the “19” again, which was still only a few feet away as well. Now both were lit up causing the room to mostly be visible again in that bright

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purplish color. This time I didn't extinguish the light from my flashlight though as I stepped on the "77" once more. One by one the lights of each of the numbers disappeared again descending the room back into the same darkness as before with the exception of the small light still emitting from my flashlight.

"8-16-1977" I said aloud. Like anyone was really listening to me...

"1-8-1977" I repeated the other number combination aloud as well hoping desperately to find some type of connection. I got they were dates. But what kind of dates?

"I REALLY HATE PUZZLES!" I screamed at the top of my lungs hoping the cave would understand my frustration and help me out.

Dates. Dates. Famous dates? Dates of...UGH! I don't know!!!

"WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE A STUPID PUZZLE?" I shouted angrily at the cave. I half expected it was going to talk back to me. It didn't of course.

"Birth dates???" I mumbled to myself.

Hmmm...Birth dates...I moved my flashlight around the room and thought about my own birthdate. It couldn't be that easy...could it?

Looking around I saw the "6" not too far away and stepped on it watching as it began to emit that eerie purple glow. The "11" was on the other side of the room though, which forced me to tiptoe around a bunch of other numbers to get there. After doing the same on my way back to get to the "19" again, I observed how most of the cave and myself were basking once again in that almost soothing purplish color.

But where is the number 72???

I panicked for a moment and then I saw it...tucked away almost all by itself in one of the far corners of my current prison. After reaching it in somewhat of a weird movement to get there without touching any other number, I slowly placed my right foot down upon it, causing it to burn purple like the rest of the numbers I had already pressed.

At first I thought nothing was going to happen other than them all going out again, but then...

I began to hear separate noises from two different locations around me. Both were similar to each other and similar to something I had heard not too long before. It actually sounded as if large rocks were grinding and crunching against each other. Relief started to set in as I watched the granite door reopen to the cave, emitting a very dim light from way above. And then I saw it...the source of the other similar noise.

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A clear crystal pedestal, about the height of one you would see in a church for baptism, slowly emerged from the floor, directly in the middle of the cavern. And directly in its center was a much tinier crystal pedestal several inches high and wide. At its top lay a brightly glowing purple crystal. It was slightly larger than the size of a golf ball and shaped with many sides positioned in weird angles.

As the pedestal came to a complete rest at its full height, the enchanting radiance of the purple crystal beckoned me to come closer...

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Chapter 4

The whole cave was shimmering now in an incredible display of purple beauty. I was so entranced by it I was completely ignoring the fact that the entrance to where I first entered my temporary prison was now opened. It almost felt as if the odd-shaped crystal that lay atop the tiny pedestal was slowly pulling me towards it one step at a time and away from that opening and my escape.

"I know I should leave right now while I have the chance..." I muttered to myself. Yet the glow and draw of the crystal appeared to be far more powerful than any sense of rationality I had left in my brain.

A few more steps and I'd be within arm's reach from touching the shiny object that had my complete focus at the moment. Thoughts of Indiana Jones and Raiders of The Lost Ark quickly flittered across my brain, as it desperately tried to remind me of that huge rolling ball that chased Indy out of a cave once he took the sacred sparkly object from its place of long dormancy in the movie. None of that felt like it mattered though because the closer I came to the purple crystal, the more calm I seemed to become.

And there it was, right in front of me now. I could feel my right arm rising up, hand opened, ready to grasp onto its magnificence. I honestly couldn't tell if I was even in charge of my own body anymore as I watched my hand reach up to take it away from its silent resting place. While my fingers gradually clasped around it, I noticed it felt overly warm to the touch.

For as much as I've watched Indiana Jones and various other treasure hunt based movies, you would think I'd have been more cautious taking this crystal into my hand, but heck I was a 12-year old kid! I didn't know any better.

At the precise moment I drew my hand back towards me, crystal clenched within it, that very familiar grinding and crunching rock noise suddenly started. I looked over in horror to see the doorway beginning to come down ready to seal me back within this tomb. This time my brain jolted me with a huge surge of fear and adrenaline, which was enough to get me to race towards it.

"YOU'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT!" my brain screamed at me. *"RUN!"*

For a moment, I truly thought I really wasn't going to make it because there were only a few feet left before the cave was completely sealed once again. So I dove to the floor and rapidly rolled sideways watching as the bed of rock loomed just inches above my body. My right arm and hand, which was still clutching the glowing crystal, barely escaped from being crushed, but my trusty flashlight that had been a part of so many of my previous adventures didn't fare as well. It had fallen out of my pocket during my diving roll and gotten smashed into smithereens when the doorway came fully to a close.

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I didn't care though. I WAS FREE. And I had my treasure...whatever it was...

I raced up the long set of stairs towards the dim light, grateful to be alive and not sealed away in some dark prison forever. Somehow I just knew that my birthday numbers wouldn't have opened that doorway a second time. As I took several sets of steps at a time, I shoved the crystal into one of my pockets fearful I might drop or lose it on my ascent. And there it finally was, the sun, still glistening through the treetops there in the woods, except I could tell that it was now much later in the day.

I quickly looked down at my watch and saw it was 5:40pm.

"CRAP!" I yelled out quite loudly hoping that might help me somehow from getting grounded by my parents once I got home. At this point, I was going to be an hour beyond my curfew even running at top speed. I instantly started racing back into the woods heading towards my home, not even looking back once at the large rock, the rusty metal hatch, or my shovel that I forgot to grab, which had been resting on the second step just inside the hatch.

It was 6pm by the time I reached the edge of my backyard. I had already tripped and fallen a number of times that I'm sure with each, the animals in the woods and all the trees around me had laughed at my clumsiness. I had spent the entire 20 minutes getting there thinking of ways to explain why I was late, but honestly, I still had no idea what to say.

I sprinted up to my backdoor and attempted to turn the knob. It was locked.

"That's funny." I thought. It never gets locked until after I get home from playing outside. I wondered if this was a tactic to scare me because I was so late.

BANG. BANG. BANG. I knocked on the door rather loudly. No answer. *BANG! BANG! BANG!* I knocked again, even louder.

A figure then appeared that wasn't my mother or my father. It was a woman I didn't recognize.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a puzzled look on her face after opening the door.

"Who are you?" I responded as I started to walk in to my house.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" she said slightly perturbed pushing me back outside.

"I live here!!!" I said suddenly feeling a little scared.

If this was actually a joke then my parents were taking it a little too far I thought.

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"I'm Mrs. Sampson, and I think you have the wrong house young man!"

"MOM! DAD!" I shouted into the house hoping they would suddenly appear.

"What's your name son?" she asked in a much more inviting tone, noticing I was getting really scared.

"I'm Andy. Andy Dawson."

Her mouth suddenly dropped with a look of shock.

"Andy...where...Oh My God! Harold! Call the police!" She immediately shouted into the house behind her.

"Andy, please come in. I'm so sorry for being a little rude...I...didn't know it was you..."
She reached for my hand to bring me into my house. As soon as I took a few steps into my family room, I saw nothing was how I remembered, causing tears to well up in my eyes.

"I don't understand..." I said trying desperately to hold them back.

"Andy, I don't know any other way to tell you this...but...you...went missing... three years ago..."

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Chapter 5

"Three years?" I said in disbelief. *"This is ridiculous! I've only been gone since 1pm!!!"* I said angrily.

"Please calm down Andy, obviously you're in a bit of shock right now," Mrs. Sampson said, trying to comfort me as best as she could.

"The police are on their way Mary," said Mr. Sampson emerging suddenly from the kitchen.

"Andy why don't you just sit down here and relax. Maybe you'd like something to drink?" said Mrs. Sampson. I knew she was just trying to help me not feel so scared, but it wasn't working and it was obvious to me now that this wasn't some elaborate joke either.

"I'm not thirsty! I just want to go to my room and lay down right now and yet you're telling me this isn't my home anymore. I'm so confused! I left here at 1pm to go play in the woods ma'am. My mom told me to be back by 5pm, but I lost track of time because of this cave and these numbers on the floor and a door that locked me in, and well...a bunch of other stuff that's too hard to explain right now. I know I may be an hour late but come on, three years late???"

I pinched my cheek rather hard hoping somehow I wasn't going to be able to do it or feel it, given that's supposed to mean a person is dreaming. But ouch! It really hurt!

"Andy, how about watching some television until the police arrive? And try not to worry, I'm sure they've contacted your folks by now..." Mr. Sampson chimed in with hope in his voice seeing his wife feeling somewhat helpless.

I watched as this stranger in my home turned on a TV I had never saw before. And as I sat down on a couch that wasn't the one there when I had left five hours earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Sampson stared at each other with blank expressions making me feel even more uncomfortable. I decided it might be best to not say anymore until either my parents or the police arrived. Thankfully, twenty minutes later, a loud knock on the door broke the tension.

"Evening ma'am. I'm Officer Wooten and this here is Office Bogart. You called about one of our missing person's cases, an Andy Dawson?"

I quickly sprinted off the couch and ran to the front door hoping to see my parents standing behind the officers, but sadly they weren't there.

"Well hey there son, I'm..." Officer Wooten started to introduce himself.

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"I don't care who you are! Where are my parents? This is my home! These strange people are in my house!"

"Calm down, calm down..." Officer Bogart said gently.

"I'm Andy Dawson! I live here! I've lived here for 12 years! I went into the woods at 1pm to play and got caught up in a cave with some weird numbers and a door that locked me in and by the time I got out of there, I was late by an hour, but these weird people said it's been 3 years and that it's not my home anymore!"

I had to take a deep breath because it felt like I was beginning to hyperventilate. I know it probably sounded like I was crazy to all of them, but in my head I just recapped my entire afternoon, which unfortunately was now turning into a nightmare instead of an adventure.

"Andy, do you know your parents names?" Officer Wooten asked.

"Of course I do! Pam and Lewis! And I have a sister named Laura! She's three years older than me! My room is upstairs at the end of the hallway and hers is right next to mine! What more do I have to do to prove to you that I'm me and not crazy!"

"Andy please, we're only trying to help you. But we're going to have to take you down to the station, which is where your family is going to meet you. How does that sound?"
Officer Bogart said calmly.

"Fine!" I said storming out of the house.

I so wanted this to be a dream. But apparently it wasn't. Mr. and Mrs. Sampson weren't my parents and this wasn't my house and because of it, I couldn't even look back at them. In all honesty, I was downright scared, which is most likely why Officer Bogart let me ride in the front seat all the way to the station. Normally, I would have found this to be a pretty cool experience, but given the situation, it felt like an eternity getting there. Fifteen minutes later we finally pulled into its parking lot and there it was, my parent's silver Toyota Camry. I only recognized it because of the bumper sticker my mother had put on it long ago that said "DeColores". I immediately raced out of the patrol car once it was safely parked and into the station, not waiting for the officers to accompany me in.

"Mom! Dad! Laura!" I yelled as I burst through the station's front door, not even knowing where they were.

"Andy???" A timid sounding voice came from behind me, which sounded a lot like my mother's. I quickly turned around and there was my family.

"Oh thank God!" my mother said wrapping her arms around me as she began crying. I was crying as well, but I didn't care. I never really liked hugs before, except this one felt long overdue and much needed. My father and sister soon joined in, embracing the both

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of us and for a brief moment, I completely forgot about Mr. and Mrs. Sampson, the house that was no longer my home, and the three years I had supposedly lost.

"Are you ok son?" I looked up at my Dad who was asking me the question. I honestly had no idea what to say.

"Not really Dad. I went outside to play in the woods like I usually do on Saturdays at 1pm today. Mom saw me leave. I was hanging out at this rock like always and decided to dig for buried treasure. I found this hatch, which led into a magical cave and there were numbers on the floor in there and..."

I stopped talking because they were giving me that same look like both the Sampson's and the police did, that look like I was making everything up.

"Fine, if you don't believe me, look at this crystal I found in the cave!" I pulled it out of my pocket to show them and noticed it was still glowing purple.

I hadn't really had a chance to inspect it up close because of my abrupt departure from there when the cave door was coming down. Ironically, I was able to see now that there were symbols on each of its smooth sides and recognized a few of them as ones from the zodiac.

"Andy, it's just some rock..." My father said. *"You're obviously just a little overwhelmed right now."*

"It's not just some rock! Look, don't you see these zodiac signs on here? Don't you see how it's glowing purple?"

"There's nothing on the rock Andy..." My mom said beginning to cry again while my sister looked at me worriedly.

"Look it's right here! This symbol is a scale, and I know that's LIBRA!" I said quite loudly.

Suddenly I heard a loud *"WHOOSH"*, like the air was being sucked out of something, and then everything became weirdly silent. The scale symbol immediately disappeared on the crystal I was still holding up for my family to see. Except now they weren't moving, and neither were any of the officers around us who had been listening in on our reunion. In fact, everyone in the room was looking like mannequins stuck in strange poses, faces frozen in various expressions. My heart began racing again as I noticed a stream of coffee was hanging in mid air between a pot and a mug that Officer Bogart was holding nearby...

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Chapter 6

I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't imagining what I was seeing. It really did look as if everyone were a mannequin posing in odd ways. For a moment, I began to consider whether I might actually be going crazy. But given everything I had gone through in that cave, finding out three years had passed since leaving it, and learning that my home was no longer my home, I quickly pushed aside any of those thoughts seeing how crazy my whole day had been already.

"Mom?" I said somewhat timidly, hoping somehow she might respond. She didn't and neither did she when I lightly touched her arm either, which honestly felt no different than what any person's arm feels like when touched.

I repeated the same process with my father, my sister, and even with Officer Wooten and Bogart, but nothing happened with any of them either. Even weirder were those people in the police station who had been talking just a second earlier. Now their mouths were wide open as if they still were, yet nothing was coming out of them.

I waved my hands, jumped up and down and then screamed at the top of my lungs hoping one of them would make some sort of a difference, except none of it did. Ironically, I wasn't panicking though and neither was my heart racing. After what I had already gone through so far today, this seemed much less frightening. Somehow this magic crystal was responsible for what was happening, but how? As it continued to glow that purple color in my hand, I saw the spot was still blank where the Libra symbol had been.

"What does Libra have to do with any of this?" I said aloud hoping to get an answer out of one of the creepy police officer mannequins I had just walked up to.

WHOOSH...

"Son, you know you're not supposed to be back here..." The creepy mannequin suddenly had come to life causing me to let out of blood-curdling scream.

"AHHH!"

Officer Wooten immediately came running over and asked what was wrong and how I had gotten back there. I didn't say anything. I mean how could I, as it didn't make any sense to me either. He promptly escorted me back over to my family who were all looking at me now as if I truly was crazy. I looked at the crystal in my hand and noticed the Libra symbol had now re-appeared back in its original spot.

"How did you get over there?" my sister said pointing to where I had just been. *"I mean weren't you just in front of us?"*

"Don't you see the symbols on this crystal?" I said holding it in front of her while my

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parents and the officers just shook their heads.

"Andy, I don't see anything other than a gray rock..." Laura said sadly.

"There is! Look closer! This is definitely a Libra!"

WHOOSH...

Everyone abruptly became a mannequin again as the Libra symbol disappeared.

"LIBRA!" I said the Zodiac word again seeing if my hunch was correct.

"Andy, it's ok, I'm sure you've been through..." Office Wooten started speaking. The symbol re-appeared.

"LIBRA!"

WHOOSH...

Mannequins, no Libra symbol.

"LIBRA!"

"a lot..." Officer Wooten finished.

I smiled as I saw the symbol re-appeared once more on the crystal. While I was far from understanding anything that was going on, I was excited about this new ability. For the next few minutes, I continued to mutter the word "Libra" repetitively watching everyone become mannequins and then return back to life. It appeared as if saying the word 'Libra' really did freeze time and was somehow tied to the crystal, as the symbol would come and go each instance I said it aloud. I ultimately decided to put it away though when my mother asked me to stop saying the word Libra because from her perception, I'm sure it must have looked like I was just going nuts saying it over and over again.

After what seemed like an eternity, my family was finally allowed to take me home, or at least to my new home that is. I was totally exhausted. After having repeated my story countless times to everyone in exactly the same way, which recounted my entering the woods and then re-emerging a bunch of hours later, it was decided that I was in shock and didn't know what I was saying. It was obvious to me now that I was the only one who could see the true nature of the crystal, which made me wonder what other secrets I might find contained within it.

As I hopped into the backseat of the Camry, I thought about what Officer Bogart has told me during what felt like an interrogation. He said that the woods had been fully searched

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for many months after I had disappeared three years ago and that the only thing they had found was the huge rock I was speaking of and nothing else. The thought briefly crossed my mind that maybe they hadn't been able to see the secret hatch just like they hadn't been able to see my crystal.

The car ride to my new home was rather uneventful other than my sister continuing to stare at me like I was an alien. I managed to chuckle once though after making a creepy face at her, which had totally startled her. She looked so much older to me now, and I could tell that three years had done her well. I'd probably never admit it to her, but she did look a whole heck of a lot prettier now. My parents on the other hand both seemed to have aged, more than what three years should have brought them. Each had a ton of gray hair and wrinkles all over their face. By the time we pulled in to the driveway of my new home, everyone had stared at me and smiled in silence dozens of times, all of it having felt so very uncomfortable.

After the car was parked in the garage, I asked if I could go lay down given how tired I felt. I had been so tired I hadn't even paid much attention to the details of my new home when we had pulled in the driveway. Thankfully my parents agreed to my simple request without any further questioning and led me to the guest room where they told me it would now be my own room. I plopped down on the bed after they closed the door and pulled out my mysterious crystal that only I could see. Its purple glow soothed me and I was thankful that it was proof on some level that I truly wasn't going crazy, even if I was the only one who could see it.

"I wonder..." I said noticing my Zodiac symbol, the Gemini.

"Gemini!" I said aloud.

Suddenly I heard a *"POP"* that sounded a lot like a cork coming out of a bottle of wine.

"Hi Andy! How's it going?" An exact duplicate of me was now sitting on the bed directly next to me smiling.

As I looked down at the crystal and noticed the Gemini symbol was now the one disappeared, I grinned in excitement knowing the upcoming school year couldn't come soon enough...

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Chapter 7

"Are you really me?" I said to Andy #2 poking him.

"Of course I'm you silly!" Andy #2 said laughing.

"Well if you're me, then what number am I thinking right now?"

"11!"

"Cool! Ok, so what's my favorite food then?"

"Peperoni, cheddar, and green olive thin crust pizza well done!"

"NO WAY!!!"

"Andy, what's going on up there?" My mom suddenly shouted. I could hear her footsteps coming up the stairs. Obviously she had heard me talking to me #2.

"I'll have to catch up with you later..." I started to say quickly to me #2 knowing I didn't want her to see my duplicate.

"Gator..." me #2 finished what I would have said.

"Gemini!"

POP...

My bedroom door abruptly opened with a very concerned looking mother now looking in.

"Is everything ok? I heard you talking and laughing in here?"

"Yeah, I'm just trying to get back to my usual weird self Mom. Don't worry about me. I'll be ok." I knew my words weren't going to reassure her much. After all, she was seeing me for the first time in three years. In my mind though, it had only been a bunch of hours.

"Ok honey, dinner will be in an hour. I'm making your favorite chicken dish, Chicken Marsala. How's that sound?"

"Sounds great Mom! Thanks!" I said smiling as she closed my door again. I absolutely loved Chicken Marsala and only ever got it on very special occasions.

Hmmm, maybe I should disappear more often I thought with a grin. I looked down at the crystal that was still in my hand and decided it was best to put it in the bottom of my sock

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drawer for now. I really didn't want to have anything strange to happen over dinner. I had so many questions and so few answers, but for now, I was happy that a few good things had come out of such a terrifying and overwhelming day. My meal later that night was awesome as always and it didn't take long after it to fall asleep. I was totally exhausted from all the day's events and while my bed was not the one I remembered, it was exactly what I needed...

Thankfully, life didn't throw me any more curve balls the next day or the next week for that matter. I had chosen to keep my magic crystal hidden in the bottom of my sock drawer the entire time, mainly due to the lack of free time. I had spent all of Sunday with my family going to church, having lunch afterwards, swimming in the in-ground pool my new home had, having a barbecue later that night, and then playing cards to end the evening. As for the past five days, I had spent each of them in a YMCA day camp. I think my parents thought that sending me to camp would make it easier for not only me, but for them as well. I usually spent most of my summers in them anyway, so it was fine.

I noticed it was another hot Saturday in August as I set my arts and crafts projects down from camp and opened my bedroom window. Summer was just about over and in just about two weeks, I'd be starting school again. While it was hard to think about all the kids I once knew now being in their second year of high school instead of the 7th grade with me, I was somewhat relieved to realize my former bullies wouldn't be there anymore either.

The numbers on the clock in my bedroom read 10:15am. I had slept in much longer than I normally did. The faint murmur of my parents talking to each other outside drifted up through my opened window. They had definitely been overly protective of me since coming home, allowing me to only play in the front or back yard where they could see me. I didn't blame them for being that way though given how long they said I'd been missing. Fortunately, they weren't asking me anymore what happened out in the woods because they could see how upset I got each time I told them, mostly because they didn't believe me. I had also learned in passing from my sister that they had moved two years after I disappeared, solely for it having been too painful for them to remain there. And although I had been gone for as long as I was, she told me none of them ever gave up hope that I'd eventually be found.

It was kind of hard for me to understand what they all went through given my perception of time being quite different from theirs. Regardless, I was doing my best to get used to life at my new home, and I was more than glad to have a huge in-ground pool to play in on a hot day like today. Interestingly enough though, the pool pretty much took up the whole backyard and there were no woods to be seen beyond it, just another house instead.

As I put my bathing suit on, I decided to take my crystal out of the drawer for the first time since placing it there. It was still glowing purple, even though it appeared I was the only one who could see that. I was truly looking forward to trying something with it today that had come to me when swimming with my family last weekend. Sprinting down the stairs with it now in hand, I waved at my parents as I ran past them sitting on

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the back porch. I was told to be careful and slow down while heading down the deck stairs and into the pool area. My sister was nowhere to be found, so it looked like as if I had the whole pool to myself, of which I was glad for. The water was somewhat cool to the touch, but I knew it would be a welcomed relief from the blistering sun. After placing my towel and the crystal on a chair, I took a running jump and did a huge cannonball into the pool.

When I re-emerged to the surface, I noticed my mother and father were now peering down at me obviously making sure I was ok. It took about 15 minutes of me swimming and playing safely in the water for them to stop checking on me, which finally gave me the chance I needed. I silently got out of the pool trying not to draw my parent's attention and dried myself completely off with the towel just to make sure I hadn't. After picking up the crystal and making sure all the Zodiac signs were still present and accounted for, I looked for the one I was most curious about today, the "crab", mostly because I knew the sea creature to be aquatic-based.

"Cancer!" I said just loud enough for only me to hear.

Suddenly I found myself gasping for breath while the symbol abruptly disappeared on the crystal. I couldn't breathe at all. It was as if the passageways through my mouth and nose were completely blocked. It also felt as if something were now moving on either side of my neck. My gasping grew louder and louder, until it drew the attention and horror of my parents. I never knew what it felt like to not be able to breathe, but now I did, and the only thought crossing my mind at the moment was whether I was about to die of asphyxiation...

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Chapter 8

"C-AN-CER!" I somehow managed to sputter the word out just in time before my parents reached me and probably before I would have passed out from the lack of oxygen.

Suddenly my lungs seemed to work again allowing me to take in a huge long gulp of air.

"ANDY, ARE YOU OK???" My mother asked looking quite distressed.

"Yea, I had some water go down the wrong pipe Mom, no big deal." I lied of course. I mean how could I explain this in any other way?

"You had us kind of scared there for a moment son..." My Dad said giving me an uneasy smile and a few pats on the back.

They ended up staying at the poolside with me for the rest of the time I swam that day and ended up doing the same each time I had gone swimming during the last few weeks of summer. Soon the pool was closed and my days at camp were behind me. Life now had me back on a bus heading to my first day of the 7th grade. I thought about my crystal for a moment as I sat there and looked out the window and knew my fear of choking to death had totally kept me from playing around with it since that day. Nothing else worth mentioning had really happened since that incident other than noticing my family had actually started acting a lot more normal around me. Unfortunately it seemed as if the rest of the world wasn't, because the kids at the bus stop that morning had all been whispering and staring at me, which made me worry whether everyone else at school would be doing the same. I didn't have much time to ponder the thought though because we had just pulled up to the front of the middle school. With backpack firmly in place, I nervously headed off the bus and through the school's front doors.

"FREAK!" I had only taken a few steps into the school when I heard the word come from behind me rather loudly. Turning around, I saw a few kids snicker at me before they went off in the opposite direction. I guess that pretty much answered my question...

By the time I found my homeroom, it seemed as if everyone else was already there. The only remaining seat was up front and after sitting down there I could feel everyone's eyes staring at me from behind. Even the teacher sitting at his desk almost directly facing me seemed to be doing the same. I blame all those reporters for this because my sudden reappearance had become major news headlines for a bunch of days. They had warped everything I told both them and the police and truly believed my story was merely a concoction arising out of shock and fear, which unfortunately is what my family continues to believe as well. And according to the articles I read about me, there was no evidence found in the woods to support any of my claims. I'm guessing this is why everyone has asked me more times than I can count if I was kidnapped and how it's ok to tell them the truth. Several times I wanted to lie and give them what they desired, but I didn't. Now everyone just thinks I'm nuts, including my parents, but at least they haven't

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forced me to go see some type of children's psychologist.

Luckily, the morning bell finally rang, breaking the huge chain of stares at me. As the teacher began calling out names for attendance, I secretly wished I had the ability to become invisible.

"Amanda Ashford?"

"HERE!"

"Jonathan Bader?"

"HERE!"

"Mary Crawford?"

"HERE!"

"Brian Davidson?"

"HERE!"

"Andy Dawson?"

"Freak!" Someone from behind me muttered it loud enough for most everyone to hear.

"Here..." I responded slumping down into my seat while listening to their giggles, already beginning to dread the new school year.

As the teacher droned on name after name, I reached into my backpack to pull out a notebook for my first class, which was English. For a second I saw the warm glow coming from the crystal lying at the bottom of my bag and was comforted in knowing I really wasn't crazy. I was glad I had placed it there that morning but sadly, it looked as if everyone else would never know the truth and would always look at me this way.

Thankfully English came and went, followed by Math, then Social studies, all without incident, other than the constant staring and occasional snicker. Lunch and recess were next, which normally was one of my least favorite times of the day only because I usually got picked on quite a bit during it in past years. I had just grabbed my tray in the cafeteria line and filled it with some chicken fingers, fries, a vanilla pudding, and some milk. After paying for it with the money my parents had given me, I ventured into the sea of tables looking for a place to sit. And then it happened like it always did every single year. A foot appeared out of nowhere catching my leg as I moved forward. The plate of food on my tray began to fly off of it as thoughts of being laughed at by everyone in the cafeteria

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quickly crossed my mind.

"Libra!" I muttered in desperation hoping somehow it might still work even though I wasn't holding onto the crystal in my hand.

WHOOSH...

Time suddenly stood motionless, much to my unexpected delight. My plate of food now hung in mid-air, fingers, fries, pudding, and milk appearing like a suspended piece of artwork. To my right stood the same kid from the morning who had called me a freak, grinning from ear to ear, along with a few of his friends.

I smiled knowing I finally had a way to even the tide for once.

First, I unbuckled the tripper's pants and pulled them all the way down to the ground. I had to laugh when I saw his pink tighty-whities lying underneath. Next, I did the same with each of his friends, all having pretty ridiculous looking underwear as well. And finally, I placed my food and drink safely back on the plate and on my tray and then moved a few steps away from the still frozen grinning kids.

"Libra!" I said now smiling from ear to ear myself.

WHOOSH...

And it was right then I decided the world was now going to start knowing a new me, Andy 2.0...

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Chapter 9

The entire cafeteria suddenly erupted in laughter at the ridiculous sight of the gang of underwear buddies who had tried to have fun at my expense. Each of their grins immediately faded into looks of horror and embarrassment, especially the one who had tried to trip me. Everyone was mostly pointing at him and his pink tighty-whities. And it was me now who was the one grinning from ear to ear, as the four of them quickly pulled up their pants and ran outside to the playground hoping to escape the thunderous laughter surrounding them. I secretly celebrated my victory and even though no one knew how or who had done the hilarious prank, it still felt pretty darn good inside.

The rest of my first day back at school seemed to zoom by after that and I'm grateful to report there were no other incidents to speak of. Soon I was back home sitting on my bed looking at the crystal that had saved me and was slowly transforming me into Andy 2.0. I thought about how it had worked in the cafeteria even though I hadn't been holding onto it and wondered just how far away I could be from it to still work. I decided this was as good of a time as any to figure that mystery out because no one was home at the moment.

After setting the crystal down on my desk, I walked out of my room and stood right outside the door. I grabbed the quarter in my pocket that was left over from lunch earlier today and threw it up in the air.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

The quarter lay motionless in the air at almost my eye-level.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

I caught the quarter as gravity took back hold of it and next headed down the hallway to the top of the stairs. I couldn't see the crystal anymore of course and was probably a good 20 to 30 feet away from it now. I then tossed the quarter back into the air.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

My quarter was frozen once again, hanging in the air right before my eyes.

"Libra!"

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WHOOSH...

I caught the quarter again and decided this time to try it just outside the front door of my house. As I stood there on the porch and threw the quarter up in the air again, I half expected it wasn't going to work this time.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

Cool! I was totally shocked to see the quarter hovering in mid-air and began wondering if there were any limitations with distance from it at all? I decided to try one more test.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

After catching the quarter I walked down the street all the way to the bus stop, which was a pretty good hike from my house. I felt kind of stupid standing there with no one around as I tossed the quarter back into the air.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

It still worked! I couldn't believe it! I flicked the suspended quarter with my finger in delight, half expecting it to then fall to the ground. But ironically, it only moved forward a few inches and remained motionless in mid-air. Huh. That interesting I thought and made a mental note of it.

"Well it appears there's no limitations with distance..." I said aloud as if anyone could be listening with time being paused.

I wonder...

"Gemini!"

Nothing.

"Gemini!!!"

Still nothing.

"Libra!"

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WHOOSH...

"Gemini!"

POP...

"Hey Andy! What's up?" said Andy #2 suddenly appearing to my right as he caught the quarter before it hit the ground.

"Not much! Man this is so weird talking to myself!" I said laughing. *"Hey, I've been playing around with my crystal and seeing what it can and can't do. Do you know anything else about it?"*

"How could I know anything else about it? I'm you and know as much as you do silly! Like the fact you've been doing this quarter test now since you got home from school. And like the fact that you're at this precise moment starting to think about trying to pause time with me still here with you, right?"

"Stop doing that!"

"Stop doing what?"

"Stop reading my thoughts!"

"How can I be reading your thoughts if I'm you?"

"Ugh!"

"Libra!"

Nothing.

"See, I told you so!" said Andy #2 grinning.

We both started laughing when a voice suddenly came from behind.

"What's so funny?" said Chris, a fellow 7th grader from my neighborhood who I didn't really know all too well, as he walked around me and was now standing directly in front of us. *"Hey, I never knew you have a twin brother?!"*

I looked over at Andy #2 and knew exactly what he was thinking, especially because of the look that was now on his face, which I'm sure matched my own. My mind began racing on what to do and in all honesty, I'd probably get in trouble and have my mouth washed out with soap if I were to say the word I really want to say right now...

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Chapter 10

Chris was staring at me waiting for a response. He then looked over at Andy #2, and then drew his attention back to me again.

"Can you keep a secret?" I said nervously, feeling like I had no other choice.

"Yes..." Chris said smiling.

"Seriously, I really need to know I can completely trust you won't tell anyone else at all what I 'm about to say..."

"Geez...it's that serious huh? Yeah, you can trust me. The fact is I don't really have any friends I could tell anyway. So what this big secret with your twin brother here?"

"I have magic powers and can create a duplicate of me whenever I want..."

It sounded totally ridiculous after I said it and I could see Chris wasn't buying it either by the expression I was now seeing on his face. He then started to laugh.

"Really, I'm being serious! I'm not lying!" I said rather irritated.

"Look, I'm not stupid!" Chris said sounding like he was starting to get irritated as well.

"I am being serious and I can prove it!"

"Oh yeah, how?!"

"Gemini!"

POP...

"What the...where...did...he go?" Chris stammered, looking around and feeling confused.

"I told you I had magic powers..."

"Come on, seriously...HEY YOU CAN COME OUT NOW!" Chris shouted loudly, looking off into some nearby bushes thinking the other me was hiding there.

"He's not hiding. He's part of me..."

"Gemini!"

POP...

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"Hey Chris, what's hanging bro?" said Andy #2 as he rapidly appeared out of thin air directly in front of Chris.

"What the! How are you doing that?!"

"I told you it's magic. I still haven't figured it all out myself."

I ended up having to demonstrate it a few more times before Chris finally believed me. I decided after he did though that it was best to have me #2 go away for now.

"Gemini!"

POP...

"That's awesome!!! To think of all the cool things you can do with a duplicate of you!"

"I know right! Now do you understand why I need you to keep this a secret?!"

Chris has so many questions for me. He wanted to know everything and was asking me one thing after another. I figured it was going to take a little while to tell him so we sat down on the grassy hill nearby where I started from the beginning. I told him about the large rock I used to play at in the woods by myself and about the secret hatch I unearthed the day I went missing. I told him about the cave I found underneath it and almost getting stuck in there forever because of the puzzle on the floor. I told him how solving that puzzle with my birthdate led me to finding the crystal and how time passed so quickly in the real world while I was down in that cave for just those few hours. And then I explained to him how I first discovered the power of the crystal when I was in the police station trying to show everyone the symbols on it. Finally I told him about the powers I had learned of so far, including almost passing out at my pool and how it appeared that I didn't need to have the crystal on me to use the abilities it gave me.

"So I'm curious on one thing..." Chris said while laughing. *"Why didn't you jump into the pool dummy when you said Cancer! It sounds like you had gills on the side of your neck that probably would have helped you breathe under water silly! And most likely your normal air passage ways were closed off to make all that work correctly."*

"Yeah, I kind of thought about that after the fact, but at the time it was a little hard because I was gasping for breath and my parents were about to discover my secret." I said laughing with him.

It really felt good having someone to talk to, someone who finally believed me.

"So what do you think happens if you pause time and your touching someone?" Chris said.

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"I don't know? I never tried that. Let's see..." I said as I swiftly grabbed Chris's arm.

"Libra!"

WHOOSH...

I looked over at Chris, expecting him to be frozen now, except he wasn't.

"I don't feel any different..." Chris said, looking around and touching parts of his body.

I was truly amazed to see it actually had worked, but Chris still didn't think anything was different.

"Look up..." I said as I stared at the bird hanging in mid air almost directly above us.

"Holy crap!" Chris pointed at the bird and then noticed a plane even higher in the sky that was motionless as well, almost like a mobile above a baby's crib. *"So do you have to be touching me as well to go back to real time?"*

"Libra!" I said standing near him but not touching him at all.

WHOOSH...

The plane continued on its way while the bird flew off in the direction it was heading and thankfully I noticed Chris was moving around with me once again.

"You are so dam lucky you know? To have all these powers... But hasn't it been killing you not knowing why it picked you, where it came from, and why the hatch or cave no longer seems to be there in the woods?" Chris said inquisitively.

"Well duh! Yeah, but how am I supposed to figure all that out?"

"Maybe all those answers will come to you when you say one of those zodiac names?"

"Huh, I never thought of that. I guess I was sort of scared after that Cancer incident."

Immediately I started gasping for breath again and felt those gills appear on my neck.

"Say Cancer again you idiot!" Chris said with a huge smile.

"CA-AN-CER!" I choked the word out of me like before and then took a big gulp of air.

"Wow, I guess I can see why you'd be freaked out not to try some of the others. But hey look, you've got me now to help you through this right? We're a team now. You're

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Batman, I'm Robin ok?"

"Yeah...except no stupid costumes ok?" I said laughing.

"So are you up for trying a new one just to see what happens?"

"I guess so..." I said nervously, but felt a little better that Chris was there.

"How about Capricorn? That's my sign..." he said.

I looked briefly at my watch and knew I needed to be getting home because my parents would probably freak if I weren't there when they walked in the front door. But I figured I had enough time to try at least one new symbol.

"Capricorn!" I said as I thought about my mother coming in the front door and calling for me.

Suddenly I saw a vortex of spinning light appear out of nowhere along with a weird *"VAVOOM"* sounding noise. I hoped Chris could see it, as it looked so beautiful and appeared to have the whole set of rainbow colors circling it. In what was probably no more than a blink of an eye, it completely enveloped me and for a moment or so, I found myself being thrust down a long tunnel lit in a spectacular display of millions of colors, all moving in the direction I was. Then without warning, the end of the tunnel rapidly zoomed towards me. *VAVOOM...* Immediately I was thrust out of it and toppled to the floor of the hallway right inside my front door. And there in the kitchen directly in front of me just a few steps away stood my mother with her back to me...