

Jake Rogers'

Planet

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CHAPTER ONE

The Portal

August 10

My dad forgave me when I totaled his sleek 1966 Ford Thunderbird on my sixteenth birthday. He forgave me even though he and my brothers had spent seven years restoring it.

But he won't forgive me this time. From his perspective, I'm about to total my life with this decision, and he labored nearly eighteen years building it into what he wanted it to be.

"There it is," my dad says as we round a bend in the forested trail.

As we hike into the clearing, the trees slide out of view like giant curtains to expose the Grand Tetons. They tower over the smaller mountains. Their jagged peaks jut into the sky like crumbling skyscrapers of some long-forgotten civilization.

"The tallest one is called the Grand Teton." My dad stops in the afternoon sun and reaches for his water

bottle in his backpack. “That’s the one your brothers and I climbed.”

I stop beside him. The daunting peak is sheer rock.

“Now that’s an adventure I’ll never forget.” He laughs. “We almost had to turn around. Could’ve died too. A lightning storm swept in from nowhere, forcing us to shelter between the rocks. We were terrified, but I couldn’t be prouder of how your brothers faced the danger. Especially when the mountain shook from the thunder. We—”

“Dad, you tell this every year at the Sandia Labs family picnic.”

“I do?” He wipes the sweat from his forehead and gulps his water.

I pull out my water bottle. “Sometimes you’ll talk about them for half an hour.” Without mentioning me once.

And the odds of him ever bragging about me will be zero when I tell him what I’m going to do.

My heart pounds. Should I wait?

“Isn’t this place beautiful, Jake?”

“Yup.”

His green eyes lock on me.

I might've gotten his green eyes and brown hair, but that's it. My brothers all inherited his muscular build and tall frame. I look away.

Soft white clouds drift so far out of reach across the happy blue sky. A red-tailed hawk's call pierces the slow breeze. Its signature red tail tilts as the hawk dips to the right, gliding toward the Grand Tetons and disappearing behind the trees.

I'd love to explore every nook and cranny in those rocky peaks, except I hate the outdoors. I should find a mountain-exploring video game. That way I can explore without all the discomfort or pressure of being with my dad.

"Do you know why I like to come here for these entering-manhood trips?" My dad takes another drink, then screws the cap back on.

"Because it's tradition?"

"Well, yes, but I initially chose to bring Tyler here because of these mountains. The Grand Tetons can be seen a hundred miles away." My dad turns to me. "They stand out. And that's what I want for you. Your brothers have worked hard to get to where they are. They've taken risks and stood up for what's right. And

now, people look to them. I want you to be a man who stands out like them.”

I drop my gaze to the ground. He’s wrong. I’m not one of the towering peaks. I’m one of the small hills at the base of the Grand Tetons that are forever trapped in their shadows.

“Now that you’re starting your Servant Leadership Project, you’re one step away from earning the Freedom Award and becoming a Freedom Ranger.” He smiles at me. “Your decision to persevere through the Trail Life program has proven you’re now a man.”

I bite my tongue. If this “path of success” is so good, why do I feel weaker every time I step down it?

“Think of all the college scholarships you’ll win with that on your résumé?” My dad slides his water bottle back into its pocket.

College.

I’m never done.

My accomplishments are never enough. And what will come after college?

A shiny green beetle crawls onto my hiking boot. I let the complex creature enjoy the sun. It lifts its outer shell and flutters its wings. He can fly? What else hides under that shell of his?

“We should keep going if we want to reach the camp before sunset.” He gives me a firm pat on the back and continues down the trail, which curves down to the right and toward the creek.

I don’t follow.

The green beetle races off my shoe like an obedient dog trying to keep up with my dad’s quick pace.

Don’t try to walk his path! You’ll only fail! I want to yell after it.

Just as I did.

Football, calculus, Trail Life, and now college. With each step, I always found one more rung on the endless achievement ladder with the baiting promise of my dad’s approval at the top.

I need to stop climbing.

I take another drink. It doesn’t wash away the growing nausea.

I sigh.

It’s time.

“Dad?” I cringe in anticipation. “I’m not going to do my Servant Leadership Project.”

“What?” He comes to an abrupt stop and turns back to me. “You’re joking, right?” His frown weighs

on me like the shoulder pads I wore to live up to his expectations.

My back dampens with sweat.

“Why?” He takes a step toward me. Gravel grinds under his boot. “Why quit when you’re this close?”

I don’t want to quit. I love Trail Life and I’d love to earn the Freedom Award. In fact, I first realized I needed to break free of his plan for me because of what Trail Life taught me about being unique and staying true to myself. Not becoming a Freedom Ranger feels like a personal badge of honor as it will prove I’m strong enough to face my dad’s disapproval and start down my own path.

He’ll never understand this, but I hope he’ll understand my other reason.

I clench my fists. I’ve rehearsed this response a hundred times. “This is my senior year. I need to commit extra time with the officers in my birder club so it will continue after I graduate.”

“Jake, that’s on them. It’s not your responsibility if they let it die.”

“It *is* my responsibility; I’m the founder. Many say this club is the only place they can be themselves. I can’t

let it fall apart.” I fidget with a strap on my backpack and focus on the beetle as it races down the path.

“Why can’t you do both? You’ll age out of Trail Life before the end of the year.”

I let out a deep breath. “Because I don’t want to—”

“Don’t want to?” He scoffs.

I don’t want to walk this path you’ve scripted for me! I want to scream, but there’s no point. My mom could’ve helped him see things my way a few years ago. Now she’s too busy.

“What kind of excuse is that?” My dad strides toward me, but the beetle doesn’t stop or run away. “What if I stopped working just because I didn’t want to? Where would you live? Whose food would you eat? Where would you get the money to buy your precious video games?” The shadow of my dad falls over the beetle.

Crunch.

My dad walks on, eyes locked on me. He continues his tirade, but his words are distant. Behind him, the fractured beetle lies motionless.

Something so intricate, complex, and unique. Gone. Killed underfoot by a giant who never took the time to notice.

My eyes sting. My jaw trembles. I focus on the trees as the ache in my chest grows. Why do I have to like odd things like track and bird-watching? Why did God have to set me up for failure by throwing me into this scrawny body?

My dad's rant ends. He stops two paces from me and lets out a huff. "Jake...I'm sorry." His voice is softer. "It was wrong of me to yell at you. I just don't want you to give up on something you've worked so hard for."

"But I don't want to be a Freedom Ranger."

My dad gives me a curious look. "But you've worked toward this for years."

"No, Dad, *you've* worked toward this for years."

He throws up his hands. "What are you talking about?"

I shake my head and push past him on the trail. "I'm sorry I ruined your life," I whisper. I don't need his help to feel like a failure.

We hike the next hour in silence. We set up camp in the tall pines just off the trail and eat a pad thai freeze-dried meal around our fire without a word. Neither of us comments on the beautiful sunset far off on the horizon as the sun dips between two smaller moun-

tains. The air cools, and the shadows deepen around us. The evening birds grow quiet as they shelter against the invading night.

My dad stares at the crackling fire and rolls up the sleeves of his flannel shirt. “Jake, I love you and want to help set you up for a bright future.”

I pull a stick out of the fire. A small flame flickers on the end. Its light is nothing compared to the campfire’s, but the tiny flame dances without a care.

“When I came here with your brothers, I gave them each a compass like this.” He pulls a compass out from under his shirt and lifts its string from around his neck. He holds it out for me to see.

It’s a regular compass, except on the top is the Trinity Peaks Trail Life symbol with the trailman motto “Walk Worthy.”

So *this* is that infamous moment my brothers talked about.

Tyler framed his compass, Anthony wears his around his neck, and Nathan hung his up on his car’s rearview mirror. Their compasses are proof my dad is proud of who they’ve become.

“After I reached the rank of Eagle Scout, my dad gave me a compass. It was the last gift he gave me before

he passed away.” My dad snuffles as he stares through the fire. “Though I decided to put you four into Trail Life rather than Boy Scouts, I continued the tradition with your brothers. I gave them each a compass as a reward for becoming Freedom Rangers and entering manhood. I brought it because I was certain you’d finish also.” His deep green eyes bore into me.

“Why does becoming a man have to be tied to earning the Freedom Award?” The small flame on the end of my fire stick pops in and out of existence.

“I’m not saying it is. But if you quit now, you won’t earn this compass.”

“So, I haven’t earned the right to be a man?”

“No, Jake.” My dad shakes his head. “Part of being a man is finishing what you start. You can’t keep wandering through life, leaving everything half done.”

“*Everything*, Dad? What about winning my sophomore piano competition and lettering in track last spring? What about starting the bird-watching club at school? Do any of those accomplishments count?” The little flame on my fire stick flickers out. Smoke replaces it, swirling into the night sky.

“I’m proud of you for those, but you can’t make a living watching birds or playing the piano.” He keeps his voice gentle, but his grip on his knee tightens.

I give an exasperated sigh and throw my stick into the fire. “And I can make a living by becoming a Freedom Ranger?”

“No, but it prepares you for bigger jobs.”

“But track and playing the piano doesn’t?” I search for my fire stick in the firepit, but it’s gone; lost in the monotony of all the other burning sticks and logs. Even worse, adding my stick to the flame changed nothing.

“The Freedom Award goes much further toward winning you a job than playing the piano or starting a bird club.”

I abandon our log bench and trudge to our tent. My backpack leans against the tent. The can of bear spray clipped to it reflects the fire.

“So you don’t want to be an engineer like me, a pro-athlete like Tyler, a professor like Anthony, or a doctor like Nathan. You don’t want to be a Freedom Ranger. You don’t want to go to college.”

I stop at the tent and turn back to my dad. My heart thumps against my ribs. The firelight exaggerates my father's massive biceps and forearms.

“What do you want to be, Jake?”

I plant my feet on the ground. “I don't know.” I glance down and whisper, “I wish you could stop focusing on my future and just see me.”

Suddenly my hair prickles under my clothes. My semilong brown hair stands on end.

A bright-pink light cuts across the ground in front of me like a flare. It grows into a line and arcs around me, separating me from my dad. I back away, but it moves clockwise and cuts me off while encircling me and our tent. The light rises three feet into the air like an unmoving flame.

“D-Dad?”

He's already on his feet. His mouth parts but no words escape.

I dash for the final gap.

The light completes the circle, and the ground drops out from under me.

Light blinds me.

I'm falling.

CHAPTER TWO

Birds

August 10

I land on a smooth surface and tumble down it. I squint, but my surroundings are still too bright.

My hand latches onto a cool surface. My body jolts as my grip stops my fall.

Our tent rolls past me down a rocky slope. The tent stakes clatter somewhere downhill.

Above me rises a giant tripod. I'm gripping one of the three legs. The structure's base—which I tumbled down—is curved like a satellite dish.

It's all at an angle because it's built into the side of a...mountain?

I gasp and turn.

Mountains covered in snowfields surround me. I'm above the tree line. The warm sun beats down on me from a beautiful teal sky. Tall crumbiling skyscrapers jut out of the forested valley.

What in the world?

“Jake!” My dad’s voice sounds warped and garbled like I’m underwater.

In the center of the tilted dish glows the pink circle that formed around me. I must’ve fallen through it...

Like a portal in a video game.

My dad stands upside down on the other side of the glowing circle like a reflection on a pond. The bright daylight here illuminates his face and the night-shrouded forest behind him. Deep lines etched on his forehead reveal his terror.

“Are you okay?”

I wedge my fingers into one of the small grooves cut into the satellite-dish base and pull myself up the slope toward him and the portal.

“Help me, Dad!”

“Don’t worry, Jake, I’m coming.” He rushes to the circle’s edge.

Starting from the outer edge of the pink circle, the image of our campground dissipates. Desperation and horror mix in my dad’s eyes as his grip on the compass loosens. He dives toward me.

“Jake!” His warbled yell comes through a second before his image disappears. Only the compass passes through the portal before it closes.

The compass clatters down the sloped surface. I reach out, snatch it, and quickly hang it around my neck. All that remains of the portal is a glowing pink rim, but even that fades a few seconds later.

“No,” I whisper.

I scramble up the angled surface using the grooves etched into the metallic base. When I reach the spot where the pink circle shone seconds before, instead of passing through, my hand meets the cold metal.

The glowing circle I fell through—that separated me from my dad—is gone.

“Dad!” A gust of wind smothers my words.

I hold my dad’s compass out. The only part of him that came through the portal with me. A reminder of my failure to be the man he wants me to be.

“Dad?” I whisper.

I am alone.

My hands shake. My dad is gone.

No, I’m the one who’s gone.

A deep ache grows inside me as the terrible danger of my situation takes root. I grip the small grooves in the surface under me like they’re the only things anchoring me to reality.

Everything I know is on the other side of this surface.

Another gust of wind blows past me, then stills as silence fills the massive world around me. The air is chilly, but it's warmer than the crisp night air of the Grand Tetons.

The snow-patched mountains stretch out into the distance. Between them, lush forests full of blue, green, and orange trees grow in the valleys. White clouds float overhead while others slide between peaks, rolling down their slopes like a slow-motion flood. It's beautiful and wild.

Is this place real? Am I dreaming?

The ruins down in the valley don't appear Greek or Roman. Vines grow up structures thirty stories tall. Plants and trees spill out of broken windows. Their dark silvery surfaces shine in the patchy sunlight.

My friend Sophie would love this view. She always stopped at beautiful spots during our cross-country or track practices to soak in sights like this of Albuquerque. She'd climb a boulder during one of our La Luz Trail runs and sit there until half the team passed us. I'd sit with her, watching her long blonde hair blow

in the wind. The sinking sun would light her dazzling blue eyes.

I glance back at the dark metal where the pink circle had been a moment before.

Was that a real portal? If it was, then this place is real and I have no clue how to get home. Portals are impossible, aren't they?

The strange grooves carved into the metal on the slanted surface look like some script, but they aren't any language I've seen before.

Please let this all be a dream.

No, it can't be a dream. I was awake a minute ago.

Am I hallucinating?

According to my watch, it's a quarter past nine in the evening in Wyoming, but it's midmorning here.

I rub my eyes. It feels so real. But it can't be.

Please, God, let this all be a dream.

Portals don't exist, yet I fell through something.

The sun peeks out from behind a cloud as the satellite dish hums to life under me. My hair stands on end like it did a second before the portal opened. The bright-pink rim of the circle glows. It arcs around the whole circle but stops short of connecting on the top side.

Being in the center of the circle, if the portal opens I'll fall back through and appear back at our camp.

I take a deep breath. "Please, Jesus."

I wait but nothing happens.

The pink rim follows a narrow groove that separates the center black metal from the lighter-gray metal surrounding it on the satellite dish. The darker substance must open the portal, but why isn't it now?

I wedge my fingers into the chiseled-out etchings and climb a few more feet on the angled satellite-dish-like base. I reach the top of the pink rim where the pink lines fail to connect and complete the circle. A shadow starts where the glowing light ends.

The sun shines through a large, pink lens in the top of the tripod. The shadow comes from the rim around the lens.

Not that I know anything about how to create a portal, but it seems as if the pink light through the lens must perfectly line up with the black circle for the gateway to form.

The portal isn't opening because it's off a bit. The sun is too high in the sky, which means it's too late in the morning for sunlight through the lens to light up the center black circle and open the gateway.

I let out a defeated sigh and slide back down to the leg of the tripod at the bottom of the satellite-dish base.

My chest tightens as the truth hits me.

This is real.

This isn't just a beautiful picture someone took or a cool scene in a video game. I'm actually here in this wilderness.

I'm a speck on this giant mountain range that stretches as far as I can see.

I pound my hand against the hard metal. How could I be so stupid? I should've acted quicker when the pink light first formed.

Instead, I stood there for the first second as I did while playing safety on my freshman football team when the giant running back plowed through me to score the winning touchdown.

Why am I so weak?

The question on everyone's mind that day when I cost us the game rings in my head: "*That's the youngest Rogers boy?*"

So I quit just as my dad says I always do.

And now, somehow, I managed to fall through something that shouldn't exist. If my terrible luck continues, I'll end up dying in a unicorn stampede.

My hands shake as I stare at the foreign mountains surrounding me and the city ruins. Where am I?

If it's morning here at 9:00 p.m., then I must be on the opposite side of the planet...unless the portal transports through time also.

My mouth goes dry. *God, please no.*

What should I do? Where should I go?

The high alpine is starting to turn green between the receding snowfields. That could be an easy way to walk, but it would be cold and windy. Down in the valley, a forest of blue, orange, and green-leafed trees grows like a fluffy blanket. It would be warmer down there, but what vicious predators await me?

I've gone camping several times for Trail Life. I've even completed the Trail Skills badge, but I always had a trail. I always knew where I was going and how to get home.

A compass does nothing if I don't have a map or an end destination. The only way I know how to get home is to go through this solid metal dish.

It's like someone handed me a controller in the middle of a video game I've never seen before and left the room. I don't know the controls, I don't know the goal, and I definitely don't have the skill.

This isn't a game of make-believe in my backyard. I'll have no bed at night and I have no food.

How many miles am I from civilization? How far will I need to walk?

How do I know which way to walk?

My dad would know. This is a video game he's familiar with. Not me.

"Jesus, please, I really need your help. I can't—"

Rau! Rau! The animal cry pierces through the wind. A bird flies over the crest of the mountain.

My jaw drops. It's huge! It's easily four or five times the size of an albatross, which is impossible; the albatross is the largest flying bird.

The monster bird has a long beak and is all gray with leathery wings.

Wait, aren't pterodactyls extinct?

I can't identify every bird on the planet, but certainly I'd know if a pterodactyl-like bird existed. Incredible! My fellow birders would freak right now.

Raaaauuuuu! The bird's call hammers me like a clap of thunder. Its wings tilt as it turns...toward me. Its eyes lock on me as its large talons reach for me.

I gasp and jump to my feet.

“What are you doing, God?” I yell as I race downhill.

Farther down the slope, my tent rests against a large boulder. The tent can't help me, but the boulder...

I fight to keep my feet under me as I careen down the mountain.

Large rocks dislodge and tumble beside me like cross-country runners fighting to beat me to the finish line. I jump over a larger rock and fall another six feet before landing back on the steep slope.

Rau!

It sounds like it's right behind me, but I'll trip if I look.

Wind whistles off the massive bird's wings.

The moment I reach the boulder, I grab a bulge in the rock and use my momentum to swing myself behind it.

A shadow engulfs me, and a massive gust of wind crashes into the rock. I press myself against the boulder and pray.

Half a second later, the shadow passes, and the giant bird flies overhead.

“Ha! You missed me, you stupid...”

But it wasn't aiming for me. The green tent hangs in its talons.

As it flies away, my dad's red sleeping bag slips through the tent door and falls to the ground like a giant, slithering air worm.

The bird doesn't seem to care or notice as it carries our tent into the distance.

I sigh and stand to watch the massive creature flap its impossibly huge wings. Its wingspan must be thirty feet or more! How many times have I longed to see one of these legendary beasts alive?

The bird soars over a ridge, then glides down the valley, toward the city ruins.

What other animals dwell here? What other ancient ruins hide under the canopy in the forest below? If my friends Oliver and Matt were here, we'd explore this place like we did all the forests and caverns in *Minecraft*. We'd build an awesome fort at the top of one of these mountains and make a—

What am I doing? I can't treat this like some sort of fun exploration video game. If this is real, I'm in terrible danger. And, unless there's some big conspiracy, pterodactyls should be extinct. Something is terribly wrong about this place.

Where am I?

The sides of my vision grow fuzzy.

How far am I from home? How do I get back?

My fingers and toes tingle. My chest contracts and expands so fast, all I manage is a million half breaths a second.

Where will I get food?

I barely sit before everything goes black.

CHAPTER THREE

Taking Action

August 10

A gust of cold wind blasts my skinny body. I open my eyes and sit up. The air races down my shirt to chill my sweaty back.

I'm on a mountain? How did I get here? Trees grow far below, but all I get here are gray rocks.

Oh, right, I fainted.

I rub the side of my head as I recollect the past thirty minutes. Why am I the one living this nightmare? I'm probably the least capable of surviving outdoors, and fainting from fear definitely doesn't help my case.

What am I supposed to do? Do I stay and hope the portal opens again, or do I start walking and hope I find someone who speaks my language? If I'm lucky, someone may still live in the abandoned city.

It would be nice to know where I am, or *when* I am. But how do I figure that out? There's no big sign with

a giant red arrow pointing to a spot on a map saying “you are here.”

My dad and brothers would love to be transported to an unknown land and find their way home. My mom would hate it here, but maybe she'd like the peace and quiet away from her demanding nursing position and my grandparents' ever-increasing health problems.

Why would God let this happen to me? I know he must care about me. I felt him with me all those times I walked down the school hallway and faced my mocking peers. He rescued me many times from the football jocks by sending a teacher or the principal down the hallway when they were humiliating me. God comforted me when they called me “Fake Rogers” because I couldn't get a single tackle unlike my legendary brothers who led my school through numerous winning football seasons.

God cared for me and helped me then. Where is he now?

“Show up whenever you want to fix this mess, God. I'm only in terrible danger and desperately need your help! But take all the time you need.”

Except I don't have time. Once another pterodactyl swoops in I'm dead. I'd like to see one again, but I'd rather study it as it hunts something else.

I shake my head and force away the smile that somehow crept onto my face. What's wrong with me? I hate this place.

Without a tent as a decoy or someplace to shelter, I'll be toast if another bird spots me.

Shelter. That's my first priority. The birds can't find me if I'm hidden. Unfortunately, the only form of shelter is the trees far down the mountain.

My chest aches at the thought. I gaze back up at the portal tower. Now just the bottom of the pink circle is lit up by the sun. On the other side of the portal is my dad and the safety of my home. The farther I travel, the harder it will be to get back.

What if my dad finds a way to come through but can't find me because I wandered off? Besides, who knows what other predators are hiding in the forest or in those ruins?

"Dad, please come soon." I shiver in the wind.

But at least I now have a game plan. I know my next—

Rau!

Not again.

The pterodactyl call sounds distant, but I don't dare search for it. There's no point in staying near the portal if doing so means I die. I *have* to cross all that open ground to the trees.

My legs shake as I stand and force myself to take slow breaths.

I have to do this.

I find my backpack on the other side of the boulder where the tent had been. Thank God, I'd left it by the tent or else it wouldn't have fallen through the portal with me. I swing my backpack onto my back and clip it in place.

Using several small rocks, I make an arrow on top of the boulder pointing downhill. If my dad does find a way through the portal, he'll know where to find me.

As I sprint for the trees, my dad's red sleeping bag catches my eye. If I'm already cold here during the day, there's no way I'm risking a night without a sleeping bag.

A night here by myself? Oh, man. I'm doomed if I have to...

No, focus. I can't worry about two things at once.

I sprint across the slope to the sleeping bag but stop halfway to catch my breath. My lungs burn for air.

Right, the high altitude. I stagger on at a much slower pace.

I drop my pack to the ground as I reach the sleeping bag and quickly stuff it into my backpack before I turn downhill. Fortunately, the trees are downhill. It would take me all day if I had to climb up to them.

Rau! The call is much louder this time.

I double my pace, jumping as much as five feet downhill in each bound. Despite the weight of my pack, I feel lighter. Every landing isn't as jarring as I expect it to be.

Is gravity less here?

I break into the trees like the first runner across the finish line, but I don't stop there. Once I'm deep in the trees, I plop down on a fallen log and unclip my pack with shaky hands. My chest rises and falls as I fight to catch my breath.

I scan the teal sky between the trees. The pterodactyl is gone. Did it see me?

Being in the trees protects me from the birds, but what about other beasts? On the exposed mountain-side I could see anything coming from a long way off,

but now a mountain lion could be hiding behind a tree fifteen feet away and I'd have no clue.

The breeze tugs at the top of the trees, but the air is still down here. Green and blue grasses grow between the trees. Fallen logs scatter the forest floor. Birds chatter from their unseen perches. Looking up, the sun illuminates the orange, green, and blue leaves like they're a beautiful stain glass window.

I inhale. I'm safe now that I'm in the trees. Well, *safer*.

Wait. I did it!

I escaped two pterodactyls!

Have my dad or brothers ever done that? Surviving a pterodactyl attack is way cooler than earning the Freedom Award. And I did it by myself. Next time I sit in the cafeteria for lunch, who knows how many people will want to sit by me to hear the story!

That is, if they believe me.

And...I have a greater chance of dying here than I do in getting home.

I'd rather be the weird kid in high school than the dead kid in some unknown mountain range.

So that's my goal then. I may still be lost, but I know what to do. Like a video game, I have two objectives:

survive this unknown land and go home. I've already beat level one by surviving the two pterodactyls.

Perhaps I'm not as helpless in the outdoors as I thought?

So, what do I do? Where do I go? There's no path to follow.

Is this my first time journeying through a forest without a trail?

I smirk. I'm not following some preplanned path my dad laid out for me. Nor is he here to tell me where to go or say I did something wrong. I get to make my own trail. I get to go wherever I want.

It's like *Minecraft* but in real life!

If only Matt and Oliver were here. We could explore this place like we used to pretend to do in our yards back in elementary school.

A spire from one of the buildings rises enough to spot through the trees. How can I not explore the old city? It's also my best shot at getting answers.

A soft rustle sounds. Something moves through the grass to my right.

My breath catches in my throat.

A large animal stalks across the forest floor with its head low, like a tiger stalking its prey.

Right, I forgot I may die any second.

Welcome to level two, Jake.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rabbit Thing

August 10

I quietly grab my backpack.

The creature glides through the forest without a sound. I catch glimpses of its orange coat between the foliage.

It's big.

Fortunately, I've been sitting on this log in silence. If I'd been walking, no doubt this beast would be tracking me.

The creature crosses to my right and toward a small clearing. In the middle of the blue and green grassy patch crouches a blue creature the size of a rabbit chewing on something.

The beast pauses for a moment, then slowly advances. Its orange pelt blends in perfectly with the orange grasses. It stops at the edge of the clearing and waits. The little guy has no idea.

I don't want it to die, but I can't risk alerting the beast to my presence by warning it.

The forest is deathly still. The rabbit-thing notices the change in forest activity and searches for the danger.

The beast charges forward, and the rabbit-thing chirps a frightened *kee! Kee!* It flips around and races for the nearest tree: a small tree in the middle of the clearing.

The beast—which looks like a compact lion—gains on it fast. Using its powerful hind legs, it launches over fifteen feet with every bound. It leaps one last time and is about to land on the defenseless animal, but the rabbit-thing jumps straight up. The beast twists and flounders midair to catch it, landing only a nasty scratch on the rabbit-thing's hind leg before it's out of reach. Gravity catches hold of the little guy, and it starts falling back toward the beast.

Except it doesn't.

The rabbit-thing spreads its legs to reveal a skinfold between its front and hind legs. It uses these skin wings to glide the few remaining feet and land safely in the nearest branch of the tree.

How in the world...? Did I really just see that?

No way! I nearly laugh as the reality of what happened dawns on me.

But the little guy isn't in the clear yet. The beast jumps and grabs the branch with monkey-like hands. Its weight pulls the branch down. The rabbit-thing sits still as the beast reaches hand over hand to pull it lower.

Poor guy. It did its best.

The rabbit-thing's gaze locks on me as if pleading for me to save it.

My breathing stops.

I shouldn't. It would be stupid to risk my life for a random animal. But it needs help.

The plea in its eyes reminds me of Benny, the only person who joined my bird-watching club that first semester. I wanted to end it because everyone teased me about our tiny birder club. When I saw how much Benny needed the club, I knew I couldn't turn my back on him.

I carefully crawl off the log. I can't believe I'm doing this. But if I distract the beast without alerting it to my location, perhaps that will give the little guy enough time to escape.

It's a stupid idea, but I can't resist.

A jagged rock covered in blue moss sits beside the log. It fits in one hand. I aim and chuck it.

It flies farther than I anticipated and strikes the trunk with a loud *thomp!*

The beast's focus locks on the tree for a second, then spins to me.

I drop to the ground. The small pot in my bag clangs.

I wince.

Please, please, please, I mouth.

Slowly, I rise above the grasses. Both the rabbit-thing and the beast are staring at me. The beast stops pulling the branch. Its hairless wrinkly face resembles a monkey, but not in a cute way. With one last glance at the rabbit-thing, it settles on me and lets the branch swing back upward.

The rabbit-thing barely keeps itself from getting catapulted out of the tree.

The monkey-lion takes a step toward me and stops.

I stand and stumble backward until I'm pressed back against the log. My pulse pounds but I don't run. I can hardly move.

The monkey-lion angles its head to the side as it eyes all 112 pounds of my skinny body. It leaps toward me.

I need to run, but I can't. Even if I ran, there's no way I can...

The edges of my vision grow black. My chest heaves.
No! Focus, Jake!

With each bound, the monkey-lion picks up speed. Its green eyes fix on me—just like the running back who plowed through me to win the football game.

I hold my backpack between us like a shield, my hand gripping a smooth metal container on the exterior of my pack.

Wait.

I tear my gaze away from the charging beast.

My bear spray!

My vision snaps back into focus as new energy floods me. My shaking fingers fumble with the clip as the monkey-lion charges.

I give up on the stupid clip and yank off the safety. The devilish substance spews out right as the monkey-lion leaps at me.

I dive to the side as the beast flies over me and through the cloud of bear spray. I jump back to my feet.

The monkey-lion howls and rolls in the green and blue grasses. It paws at its face. The creature barrels through the forest. It hits a tree and stumbles over a log

before turning back to the clearing and rolling in the grass. Its screeches and painful howls fill the forest.

A shadow passes overhead, followed by a gust of wind as a pterodactyl swoops in. It plunges into the small clearing and hauls the monkey-lion into the sky. A few hundred feet in the air, the massive bird drops the monkey-lion. The beast twists and falls with much less grace than my dad's sleeping bag. It disappears beyond the trees with a disturbing *crack!*

Whoa. I give a short laugh. That was crazy! I shake my head as my smile grows. I protected myself against a monkey-lion!

Several more pterodactyls soar past, but they don't notice me.

Now that I see them without being in danger, it's clear from the two antennas protruding from their heads that these aren't actually pterodactyls. Oh well, it's still a fitting name.

In seconds, a very-unfriendly pterodactyl-potluck begins with horrifying screeches and *rau's*.

That could've been me. I was an inch away from death. But I won.

Pterodactyls with antennas, monkey-lions, strange rabbit-things, portals. Where am I?

A soft *kee* sounds from behind me.

The rabbit-thing crouches in the tree. The leaves shake from its trembling. As I approach, it tenses.

“Don’t worry, little guy. I won’t hurt you.”

It tries to jump and glide away, but one of its back paws slip. It falls awkwardly. I leap forward and catch it.

It doesn’t jump out of my hands but stares up at me with wide, trusting eyes. It has the face of a rabbit, but small sheeplike horns curl on the sides of its head beside its catlike ears.

“It’s okay, little...thing.” It twitches as I touch its soft forehead, but its trembling subsides. Something warm trickles down my arm. A purple and blueish substance oozes out of its back thigh.

Blood.

I pull my hand back.

The critter looks up at me with pleading eyes just like my old dog, Pax, did as she died in my arms.

My throat tightens. Tears tease the corners of my eyes.

Kee!

The critter’s call snaps me back to the moment.

I couldn’t save Pax, but I can save this little guy.

“Don’t worry, buddy, I’ll help you.” Fortunately, my dad and I put the first-aid kit in my backpack.

Once I wrap the rabbit-thing’s leg with gauze to stop the bleeding, I set him down in my lap and sit back on the wide log. It can’t bend its leg with the bandage, so it sticks out unnaturally. It should be fine, provided it manages to escape predators long enough for its leg to heal.

Its adorable round eyes follow me. What a beautiful creature. Its soft fur coat is striped like a tiger’s except his is blue with black stripes. Its nose and mouth are almost identical to a rabbit’s, especially when it wiggles its black nose. It’s about the size of a cat and has paws that resemble a cat’s with retractable claws, but it doesn’t try to claw or bite me. Why does it trust me so much?

I’ve saved plenty of baby animals from our dogs and tried to take care of them, but they never trusted me like this.

Why is everything here so different? How far from home am I?

A bird flies past me and lands on a tree to my right. Unlike all the other animals, it seems familiar. It appears to have feathers too. Its spotted pattern resem-

bles a Northern Flicker, except it's wings are a darker brown, and only its belly is red. It hops around on the trunk before hammering its beak into the wood like a regular woodpecker.

Okay, so not everything is different here.

The bird squawks, then darts from the tree with a siren-like call. Before it flies forty feet, a loud *boom* rocks me as the tree explodes right where it pecked.

I wince and shield my face with my hands. Small wooden fragments pepper me. A small trail of smoke wafts skyward from the blackened wood.

The bird quickly redirects its momentum and dashes back to the tree's base. It hops between the wooden fragments and gulps down a few bugs. A sulfuric scent drifts toward me from the explosion.

"Where are we?" I say to the rabbit-thing. I've watched tons of nature documentaries. I read dozens of books about strange animals, but I've never heard anything about animals like these.

Between the blue and green forest vegetation, a strange tree catches my attention. It has multiple branches, but instead of leaves, it has one big orange sheet that hangs over the tree like a big umbrella leaf.

I've never heard of a tree like that either.

Now that I think about it, something beyond the plants and the animals feels strange about this place. Maybe it's the earthy smell, or something in the clouds, or the general environment. It all feels...different.

Rocky, bare mountains rise as far as I can see. Each one of them has a slightly rounded peak. Large patches of snow hide in the crevasses of stunning rock formations. The sun appears as bright as normal, and the sky is a soft teal. All this isn't so strange, but down here is a different story.

The trees form a patchwork of greens, blues, and bright oranges.

Orange makes sense in the fall, but blue?

A yellow squirrel-sized creature dashes across a branch and glares at me. It caws and flicks its tail. With each caw and tail flick, its fur pulses with yellow light.

What in the world?

Did I go back in time? I know time travel is impossible, but I thought the same about teleportation. So, if teleportation is possible, why not a portal to the past?

No, this can't be the past. If anything, it would be the future since the portal opened from this end. But it can't be the future either since there are pterodactyl-like birds. Which means...

I set a hand on the log to steady myself as the thought occurs to me: I must be on another planet.

Alone.