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Jumper

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**For James Gould,
soldier, craftsman, sailor, father
and Laura J. Mixon,
engineer, teacher, writer, wife**

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**PART I:
BEGINNINGS**

Chapter 1

The first time was like this.

I was reading when Dad got home. His voice echoed through the house and I cringed.

“Davy!”

I put the book down and sat up on the bed. “In here, Dad. I’m in my room.”

His footsteps on the hallway’s oak floor got louder and louder. I felt my head hunching between my shoulders; then Dad was at the door and raging.

“I thought I told you to mow the lawn today!” He came into the room and towered over me. “Well, speak up when I ask you a question!”

“I’m gonna do it, Dad. I was just finishing a book.”

“You’ve been home from school for over two hours! I’m sick and tired of you lying around this house doing nothing!” He leaned close and the whiskey on his breath made my eyes water. I flinched back and he grabbed the back of my neck with fingers like a vise. He shook me. “You’re nothing but a lazy brat. I’m going to beat some industry into you if I have to kill you to do it!”

He pulled me to my feet, still gripping my neck. With his other hand he fumbled for the ornate rodeo buckle on his belt, then snaked the heavy Western strap out of his pants loops.

“No, Dad. I’ll mow the lawn right now. Honest!”

“Shut up,” he said. He pushed me into the wall. I barely got my hands up in time to keep my face from slamming nose-first into the plaster. He switched hands then, pressing me against the wall with his left while he took the belt in his right hand.

I twisted my head slightly, to keep my nose from grinding into the wall, and saw him switch his grip on the belt, so the heavy silver buckle hung on the end, away from his hand.

I yelled. “Not the buckle, Dad! *You promised!*”

He ground my face into the wall harder. “*Shut UP!* I didn’t hit you near hard enough the last time.” He extended his arm until he held me against the wall at arm’s length and swung the belt back slowly. Then his arm jerked forward and the belt sung through the air and my body betrayed me, squirming away from the impact and...

I was leaning against bookshelves, my neck free of Dad’s crushing grip, my body still braced to receive a blow. I looked around, gasping, my heart still racing. There was no sign of Dad, but this didn’t surprise me.

I was in the fiction section of the Stanville Public Library and, while I knew it as well as my own room, I didn’t think my father had ever been inside the building.

That was the first time.

The second time was like this.

The truck stop was new and busy, an island of glaring light and hard concrete in the night. I went in the glass doors to the restaurant and took a chair at the counter, near the section with the sign that said, DRIVERS ONLY. The clock on the wall read eleven-thirty. I put the rolled-up bundle of stuff on the floor under my feet and tried to look old.

The middle-aged waitress on the other side of the counter looked skeptical, but she put down a menu and a glass of water, then said, “Coffee?”

“Hot tea, please.”

She smiled mechanically and left.

The drivers’ section was half full, a thick haze of tobacco smoke over it. None of them looked like

the kind of man who'd give me the time of day, much less a lift farther down the road.

~~The waitress returned with a cup, a tea bag, and one of those little metal pitchers filled with not very hot water. "What can I get you?" she asked.~~

"I'll stick with this for a while."

She looked at me steadily for a moment, then totaled the check and laid on the counter. "Cashier will take it when you're ready. You want anything else, just let me know."

I didn't know to hold the lid open as I poured the water, so a third of it ended up on the counter. I mopped it up with napkins from the dispenser and tried not to cry.

"Been on the road long, kid?"

I jerked my head up. A man, sitting in the last seat of the drivers' section, was looking at me. He was big, both tall and fat, with a roll of skin where his shirt neck opened. He was smiling and I could see his teeth were uneven and stained.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Your business. You don't look like you've been running long." His voice was higher-pitched than you'd expect for a man his size, but kind.

I looked past him, at the door. "About two weeks."

He nodded. "Rough. You running from your parents?"

"My dad. My mom cut out long ago."

He pushed his spoon around the countertop with his finger. The nails were long with grease crust under them. "How old are you, kid?"

"Seventeen."

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't care what you think. It's true. I turned seventeen lousy years old yesterday." The tears started to come and I blinked hard, got them back under control.

"What you been doing since you left home?"

The tea had gotten as dark as it was going to. I pulled the tea bag and spooned sugar into the cup. "I've been hitching, panhandling a little, some odd jobs. Last two days I picked apples—twenty-five cents a bushel and all I could eat. I also got some clothes out of it."

"Two weeks and you're out of your own clothes already?"

I gulped down half the tea. "I only took what I was wearing." All I was wearing when I walked out of the Stanville Public Library.

"Oh. Well, my name's Topper. Topper Robbins. What's yours?"

I stared at him. "Davy," I said, finally.

"Davy...?"

"Just Davy."

He smiled again. "I understand. Don't have to beat me about the head and shoulders." He picked up his spoon and stirred his coffee. "Well, Davy, I'm driving that PetroChem tanker out there and I'm headed west in about forty-five minutes. If you're going that way, I'll be glad to give you a ride. You look like you could use some food, though. Why don't you let me buy you a meal?"

The tears came again then. I was ready for cruelty but not kindness. I blinked hard and said, "Okay. I'd appreciate the meal and the ride."

An hour later I was westbound in the right-hand seat of Topper's rig, drowsing from the heat of the cab and the full stomach. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, tired of talking. Topper tried to talk a little more after that, but stopped. I watched him out of narrowed eyes. He kept turning his head to look at me when the headlights from oncoming traffic lit the cab's interior. I thought I should feel grateful, but he gave me the creeps.

After a while I fell asleep for real. I came awake with a start, unsure of where I was or even who. There was a tremor running through my mind, a reaction to a bad dream, barely remembered. I narrowed my eyes again and my identity and associated memories came back.

Topper was talking on the CB.

"I'll meet you behind Sam's," he was saying. "Fifteen minutes."

"Ten-four, Topper. We're on our way."

Topper signed off.

I yawned and sat up. "Jeeze. Did I sleep long?"

"About an hour, Davy." He smiled like there'd been a joke. He turned off his CB then and turned the radio to a country and western station.

I hate country and western.

Ten minutes later he took an exit for a farm road far from anywhere.

"You can let me out here, Topper."

"I'm going on kid, just have to meet a guy first. You don't want to hitch in the dark. Nobody'll stop. Besides, it looks like rain."

He was right. The moon had vanished behind a thick overcast and the wind was whipping the trees around.

"Okay."

He drove down the rural two-lane for a while, then pulled off the road at a country store with two gas pumps out front. The store was dark but there was a gravel lot out back where two pickups were parked. Topper pulled the rig up beside them.

"Come on, kid. Want you to meet some guys."

I didn't move. "That's okay. I'll wait for you here."

"Sorry," he said. "It's against company policy to pick up riders, but my ass would really be grass if I left you in here and something happened. Be a sport."

I nodded slowly. "Sure. Don't mean to be any trouble."

He grinned again, big. "No trouble."

I shivered.

To climb down, I had to turn and face the cab, then feel with my feet for the step. A hand guided my foot to the step and I froze. I looked down. Three men were standing on my side of the truck. I could hear gravel crunching as Topper walked around the front of the rig. I looked at him. He was unbuckling his jeans and pulling down his zipper.

I yelled and scrambled back up to the cab, but strong hands gripped my ankles and knees, dragging me back down. I grabbed onto the chrome handle by the door with both hands as tight as I could, flailing my legs to try and break their grip. Somebody punched me in the stomach hard and I let go of the handle, the air in my lungs, and my supper all at once.

"Jesus fucking Christ. He puked all over me!" Somebody hit me again as I fell.

They grabbed my arms and carried me over to the open tailgate of a pickup. They slammed me down on the bed of the truck. My face hit and I tasted blood. One of them jumped up on the truck bed and straddled my back, his knees and shins pinning my upper arms, one hand gripping my hair painfully. I felt somebody else reach around and unbuckle my belt, then rip my pants and underwear down. The air was cold on my butt and upper legs.

A voice said, "I wish you'd gotten another girl."

Another voice said, "Who brought the Vaseline?"

"Shit. It's in the truck."

"Well... we don't need it."

Somebody reached between my legs and pawed my genitals; then I felt him spread the cheeks of my butt and spit. His warm saliva splattered my bottom and...

I pitched forward, the pressure off my arms and hair, the hands off my bottom. My head banged into something and I struck out to hit my hand against something which gave. I turned, clutched at my pants, pulled them up from my knees, while I sobbed for air, my heart pounding and my entire body shaking.

It was dark, but the air was still and I was alone. I wasn't outside anymore. A patch of moonlight came through a window six feet away to shine on bookshelves. I tasted blood again, gingerly touched my split upper lip. I walked carefully down to the patch of light and looked around.

I pulled a book from the shelf and opened it. The stamp on the inside cover told me what I already knew. I was back in the fiction section of the Stanville Public Library and I was sure I'd gone mad.

That was the second time.

The first time I ended up in the library, it was open, I wasn't bleeding, my clothes were clean, and I just walked away... from that building, from that town, from that life.

I thought I'd pulled a blank. I thought that whatever my father did to me was so terrible that I'd simply chosen not to remember it. That I'd only come back to myself after reaching the safety of the library.

The thought of pulling a blank was scary, but it wasn't strange to me. Dad pulled blanks all the time and I'd read enough fiction to be familiar with trauma-induced amnesia.

I was surprised that the library was closed and dark this time. I checked the wall clock. It read two o'clock, an hour and five minutes later than the digital clock in Topper's truck. *Jesus Christ.* I shivered in the library's air-conditioning and fumbled at my pants. The zipper was broken but the snapper worked. I buckled the belt an extra notch tight, then pulled my shirt out so it hung over the zipper. My mouth tasted of blood and vomit.

The library was lit from without by pale white moonlight and the yellow glare of mercury streetlamps. I threaded my way between shelves, chairs, tables to the water fountain and rinsed my mouth again and again until the taste was gone from my mouth and the bleeding of my lip had stopped.

In two weeks I'd worked my way over nine hundred miles from my father. In one heartbeat I'd undone that, putting myself fifteen minutes away from the house. I sat down on a hard wooden chair and put my head in my hands. What had I done to deserve this?

There was something I wasn't dealing with. I knew it. Something...

I'm so tired. All I want is to rest. I thought of all the snatches of sleep I'd had over the last two weeks, miserable stolen moments on rest-stop benches, in people's cars, and under bushes like some animal. I thought of the house, fifteen minutes away, of my bedroom, of my bed.

A wave of irresistible longing came over me and I found myself standing and walking, without thought, just desire for that bed. I went to the emergency exit at the back, the one with the ALARM WILL SOUND sign. I figured by the time any alarm was answered, I could be well away.

It was chained. I leaned against it and hit it very hard, an overhand blow with the flat of my hand. I drew back, tears in my eyes, to hit it again but it wasn't there and I pitched forward, off balance and flailing, into my bed.

I knew it was my bed. I think it was the smell of the room that told me first, but the backlit alarm clock face on the bedside table was the one Mom sent the year after she left and the light from the back porch light streamed through the window at just the right angle.

For one brief moment I relaxed, utterly and completely, muscle after muscle unknotting. I closed

my eyes and felt exhaustion steal over me in a palpable wave. Then I heard a noise and I jerked up, rigid, on the bedspread on my hands and knees. The sound came again. Dad... snoring.

I shuddered. It was strange. It was a very comforting sound. It was home, it was family. It also meant the son of a bitch was asleep.

I took off my shoes and padded down the hall. The door was half open and the overhead light was on. He was sprawled diagonally across the bed, on top of the covers, both shoes and one sock off, his shirt unbuttoned. There was an empty bottle of scotch tucked in the crook of his arm. I sighed.

Home sweet home.

I grabbed the bottle neck and pulled it gently from between his arm and his side, then set it on the bedside table. He snored on, oblivious. I took his pants off then, pulling the legs alternately to work them past his butt. They came free abruptly and his wallet fell from the back pocket. I hung the pants over the back of a chair, then went through the wallet.

He had eighty bucks plus his plastic. I took three twenties, then started to put it on the dresser, but stopped. When I folded the wallet, it seemed stiffer than it should, and thicker. I looked closer. There was a hidden compartment covered by a flap with fake stitching. I got it open and nearly dropped the wallet. It was full of hundred-dollar bills.

I turned the light off and carried the wallet back to my room, where I counted twenty-two crisp hundred-dollar bills onto the bed.

I stared down at the money, four rows of five, one row of two, my eyes wide. My ears were burning and my stomach suddenly hurt. I went back to Dad's room and stared at him for a while.

This was the man who took me to the mission and the secondhand stores to buy clothes for school. This was the man who made me take peanut butter and jelly to school every day rather than part with crummy ninety cents' worth of lunch money. This was the man who beat me when I'd suggested an allowance for doing the yard work.

I picked up the empty scotch bottle and hefted it, shifted my grip to the neck. It was cold, smooth, and just the right size for my small hands. The glass didn't slip or shift as I swung it experimentally. The glass at the base of the bottle was extra thick where the manufacturer had chosen to give the impression of a bigger bottle. It looked very strong.

Dad snored away, his mouth open, his face slack. His skin, pale normally, looked white as paper in the overhead light. His forehead, receding, domed, lined, looked egglike, white, fragile. I felt the base of the bottle with my left hand. It felt more than heavy enough.

Shit.

I put the bottle back down on the table, turned off the light, and went back to my room.

I took notebook paper, cut it dollar-bill-size, and stacked it until it felt as thick as the pile of hundreds. It took twenty sheets to match the stiffness of the money—maybe it was thicker or just newer. I put the cut paper in the wallet and put it back in the pocket of his slacks.

Then I went to the garage and took down the old leather suitcase, the one Granddad gave me when he retired, and packed it with my clothes, toiletries, and the leather-bound set of Mark Twain that Mom left me.

After I'd closed the suitcase, stripped off my dirty clothes, and put on my suit, I just stood looking around the room, swaying on my feet. If I didn't start moving soon, I'd drop.

There was something else, something I could use....

I thought of the kitchen, only thirty feet away, down the hall and across the den. Before Mom left I'd loved to sit in there while she cooked, just talking, telling her stupid jokes. I closed my eyes and pictured it, tried to feel it.

The air around me changed, or maybe it was just the noise. I was in a quiet house, but just the

sound of my breathing reflecting off walls sounded different from room to room.

I was in the kitchen.

I nodded my head slowly, tiredly. Hysteria seethed beneath the surface, a rising bubble that threatened to undo me. I pushed it down and looked in the refrigerator.

Three six-packs of Schlitz, two cartons of cigarettes, half a pizza in the cardboard delivery box. I shut the door and thought about my room. I tried it with my eyes open, unfocused, picturing the spot between my desk and the window.

I was there and the room reeled, my eyes and maybe my inner ear just not ready for the change. I put my hand on the wall and the room stopped moving.

I picked up the suitcase and closed my eyes. I opened them in the library, dark shadows alternating with silver pools of moonlight. I walked to the front door and looked out at the grass.

Last summer, before school, I'd come up to the library, check out a book or two, and then move outside, to the grass under the elms. The wind would ruffle the pages, tug my hair and clothes around and I would go into the words, find the cracks between the sentences and the words would go away, leaving me in the story, the action, the head of other people. Twice I left it too late and got home after Dad did. He liked supper ready. Only twice, though. Twice was more than enough.

I closed my eyes and the wind pushed my hair and fluttered my tie. The suitcase was heavy and I had to switch hands several times as I walked the two blocks to the bus station.

There was a bus for points east at 5:30 A.M. I bought a ticket to New York City for one hundred and twenty-two dollars and fifty-three cents. The clerk took the two hundreds without comment, gave me my change, and said I had three hours to wait.

They were the longest three hours I've ever spent. Every fifteen minutes I got up, dragged the suitcase to the bathroom, and splashed cold water in my face. Near the end of the wait the furniture was crawling across the floor, and every movement of the bushes outside the doors was my father, be in hand, the buckle razor-edged and about the size of a hubcap.

The bus was five minutes late. The driver stowed my suitcase below, took the first part of my ticket, and ushered me aboard.

When we passed the tattered city-limits sign, I closed my eyes and slept for six hours.

Chapter 2

When I was twelve, just before Mom left, we went to New York City for a week. It was a terrible and wonderful trip. Dad was there for his company, all his days spent in meetings and business lunches. Mom and I went to museums, Chinatown, Macy's, Wall Street, and rode the subway all the way out to Coney Island.

At night they fought, over dinner, at the one play we went to, and in the hotel room. Dad wanted sex and Mom wouldn't, even after I was asleep, because the company was footing the bill for one room only and I was on a rollaway in the corner. Three times during that week he made me get dressed and go down and wait in the lobby for thirty minutes while they did it. The third time, I don't think they did, though, 'cause Mom was crying in the bathroom when I came back and Dad was drinking, something he never did in front of my mother. Not usually.

The next day I saw that Mom had a bruise on her right cheekbone and she walked funny—not limping on any particular side, but like it hurt to move either leg.

Two days after we got back from New York, I came home from school and Mom was gone.

Anyway, I really liked New York. It seemed a good place to start over—a good place to hide.

“I'd like a room.”

The place was a dive, a transients' hotel in Brooklyn, ten blocks from the nearest subway stop. I'd picked it with the help of the Pakistani cabdriver who drove me from the Port Authority Bus Terminal. He'd stayed there himself.

The clerk was an older man, maybe my dad's age, reading a Len Deighton novel through half-glasses. He lowered the book and tilted his head forward to look at me over the glasses.

“Too young,” he said. “You're a runaway, I'll bet.”

I put a hundred down on the counter, my hand still on it, like Philip Marlowe.

He laughed and put his hand on it. I lifted my hand away.

He looked at it closely, rubbing it between his fingers. Then he handed me a registration card and said, “Forty-eight a night, five-buck key deposit, bathroom's down the hall, payment in advance.”

I gave him enough money for a week. He looked at the other hundreds for a moment, then gave me the room key and said, “Don't deal here. I don't care what you do away from the hotel, but if I see anything that looks like a deal, I'll turn you myself.”

My jaw dropped open and I stared at him. “You mean drugs?”

“No—candy.” He looked at me again. “Okay. Maybe you don't. But if I see anything like that at all, you're history.”

My face was red and I felt like I'd done something wrong, even though I hadn't. “I don't do stuff like that,” I said, stammering.

I hated feeling like that.

He just shrugged. “Maybe not. I'm just warning you. And don't bring any tricks here either.”

A memory of rough hands grabbing me and pulling down my pants made me cringe. “I don't do that either!” I could feel a knot in my throat and tears were dangerously close to the surface.

He just shrugged again.

I carried my suitcase up six flights of stairs to the room and sat on the narrow bed. The room was ratty, with peeling wallpaper and the stench of old cigarette smoke, but the door and the door frame were steel and the lock seemed new.

The window looked out on an alley, a sooty brick wall five feet across the gap. I opened it and the smell of something rotting drifted in. I stuck my head out and saw bagged garbage below, half of it

torn open and strewn about the alley. When I turned my head to the right I could see a thin slice of the street in front of the hotel.

I thought about what the clerk had said and I got mad again, feeling small, diminished. Why'd he have to make me feel like that? I was happy, excited about being in New York, and he jerked me around like that. Why did people have to do that sort of shit?

Wouldn't anything ever work out right?

"I don't care how talented, smart, bright, hardworking, or perfect you are. You don't have a high school diploma or a GED and we can't hire you. Next!"

"Sure we hire high school kids. You seem pretty bright to me. Just let me have your social security number for the W2 and we'll be all set. You don't have a social security number? Where you from, Mars? You come back with a social security number and I'll give you a try. Next!"

"This is the application for a social security number. Fill it out and let me see your birth certificate. You don't have your birth certificate? Get it and come back. No exceptions. Next!"

"I'm sorry, but in this state, if you're under eighteen, you must have parental permission to take the GED. If you're under seventeen it takes a court order. You come back with your mother or father and a birth certificate or New York driver's license, and you can take it. Next!"

There is a point where you have to give up, at least for a while, and all you want to do is shut down. I rode the subway back to Brooklyn Heights, and walked numbly in the direction of my hotel.

It was late afternoon, heavily overcast, and the dingy, gray street seemed entirely appropriate to my mood.

God damn them! Why did they have to make me feel so little? With every interview, every rejection, I'd felt guiltier and guiltier. Ashamed of something but I didn't know what. I kicked out at a piece of trash in the gutter and stubbed my toe on the curb. I blinked rapidly, my eyes blurring, the breath harsh in my throat. I wanted to just crawl into bed and hide.

I took a small cross street to get over to the avenue the hotel was on. The street was narrow, making it even darker, and there were plastic bags of garbage piled on the sidewalks, up against the stoops of old brownstone buildings. I didn't know why they called these row houses brownstones; most of them were painted green or red or yellow. The garbage was piled so high before one building had to step out into the street to pass. When I stepped back on the sidewalk, a man stepped out from a doorway and came toward me.

"You got a subway token to spare? Any change?"

I'd seen lots of panhandlers that day, mostly around the subway stations. They made me nervous, but those hungry days hitching away from Dad were still fresh in my memory. I remembered people walking past me as if I didn't exist. I dug into my pocket for the sixth time that day while I said, "Sure."

My hand was coming out of the pocket when I heard a noise behind me. I started to look around and my head exploded.

There was something sticky between my cheek and the cold, gritty surface I was lying on. My right knee hurt and there was something about the way I was lying that didn't seem right, like I'd been especially careless in going to bed. I tried to open my eyes but my left one seemed stuck shut. The

right one looked at a rough concrete surface.

A sidewalk.

Memory and pain returned at the same time. I groaned.

There was the sound of footsteps on the sidewalk and I thought about the muggers. I jerked heavily up onto all fours, my head throbbing like the dickens, my sore knee becoming even more so as I put weight on it. The sticky stuff on the sidewalk was blood.

Standing seemed impossible so I turned over and sat, my back to a row of garbage cans. I looked up and saw a woman carrying two grocery bags slowing down as she walked around the giant pile of garbage bags and saw me.

“My *gawd!* Are you okay? What happened to you?”

I blinked my open eye and put my head in my hands. The effort of sitting up made a sharp, throbbing pain stab at the back of my head.

“I think I was hit from behind.” I felt for my front pocket, where I’d been carrying my money. “And robbed.”

I pulled the lids of my left eye apart with my fingers. My eye was okay, just stuck shut with blood. I carefully touched the back of my head. There was a large lump there, wet. My fingers came away red.

Great. I was in a strange city with no money, no job, no family, and no prospects. That stabbing pain at the back of my head didn’t compare with the hurt of somehow feeling I deserved this.

If I’d only been better as a kid. Maybe Mom wouldn’t have gone, Dad wouldn’t drink so much...

“My apartment is just two doors down. I’ll call nine-one-one.” The woman didn’t wait for a response. I watched her hurry past, a container of Mace in her hand, connected to her key chain. As she walked down the sidewalk, she stayed away from the buildings, checking the doorways as she went by.

Smart. Much smarter than me.

911. That meant police. *I’m a minor and a runaway. I have no ID and I don’t want my parents notified.*

I thought about my hotel room, still three blocks away. I didn’t even feel like standing, much less walking three more blocks. I knew I’d feel safer there. I thought about my arrival there, of the steel door with the good lock, of the torn wallpaper. It was even paid up for three more days.

I closed my eyes and *jumped*.

The hotel floor was warmer than the sidewalk and I felt much safer. I edged over to the bed and pulled myself up, slowly and carefully.

I got blood on the pillow but I didn’t care.

Around midnight I went down to the bathroom, walking carefully, like my Dad after a night of drinking. It was empty. I locked the door, then ran a bath while I peed.

In the mirror I looked like something out of a slasher movie. Blood had run across my hair from the scalp wound, matting it and making the light brown stuff black and nasty. The upper left side of my face had also lain in the blood where it pooled and it was patchy, flaking off and leaving the skin underneath discolored. I shuddered.

If I’d felt well enough to walk back to the hotel, I doubt I would have made it without the police being called every block.

I got into the tub, amazed that there was hot water. The last two days it had been tepid at best. I eased onto my back and lowered the back of my head into the water. There was a slight stinging but the heat felt good. I worked soap into the hair gently, and washed my face. When I sat up, the water i

the tub was brownish red. I rinsed the soap and residual blood out of my hair with the tub's faucet, and was drying off when someone tried the door.

"I'm almost done," I said.

A voice from the other side of the door said loudly, "Well hurry it up, man. You got no right to be hogging the toilet all night."

I scrubbed harder and decided to let the hair dry by itself.

There was a loud noise, like someone hit the door with the flat of their hand. "Come oooooonnnnn. Open the fucking door!"

"I'm getting dressed," I said.

"Fuck. I don't care about that—let me in, you little faggot, so I can pee."

I got angry. "There are bathrooms on the other floors. Go use one of them!"

There was a brief pause.

"I'm not going to no other bathroom, shithead. And if you don't let me in right now, I'm going to hurt you *real* bad."

My jaws hurt and I realized I was grinding my teeth together. *Why can't they leave me alone?* "So," I finally said. "You gonna wait there, with a full bladder, or you gonna go find someplace to pee?"

"I'm not going anywhere, little fucker, until I carve a piece of your ass."

I heard a splashing sound and yellow liquid began running under the door. I picked up my clothes and, without dressing, jumped back to my hotel room.

My heart was pounding and I was still angry—"pissed off," you might say. I opened my door a crack and looked down the hallway to the bathroom.

A tall Anglo, heavily muscled and wearing nothing but jeans, was zipping up his pants. Then he hit the door again and shook the doorknob.

From one of the other rooms, someone said, "Shut up already!"

The man at the bathroom said, "Come and fucking make me!" He continued to pound on the door while he reached into his back pocket for something. When he brought it out he flicked his wrist and something shiny flashed in the hall's dim light.

Jesus Christ.

I still felt scared, but the more I looked down the hall, the angrier I got. I put my clothes on the bed and jumped back into the bathroom.

The pounding on the door was deafening. I flinched away from the force of it, then picked up the trash can from the floor and dumped its few paper towels out onto the floor. Next I filled it with bloody, soapy water from the tub and propped it above the doorway, on the arm of the spring-loaded mechanism that closed the door. I studied it critically, my heart still beating, my breath hard to catch. I shifted it slightly to the right.

Then, one hand on the lock catch, I turned off the light, unlocked the door, and jumped back to the hotel room.

I opened the door just in time to see him rattle the doorknob, find it was loose, and push forcefully into the room. There was a dull thud and water splashed out into the hall. In the middle of that he yelled and slipped on the floor, his head and shoulder coming into view as he slammed down on his back. He grabbed at his head with both hands in a manner I could identify with, if not sympathize. I didn't see where the knife had gone, but he wasn't holding it at the moment.

Other doors opened slowly in the hall and heads cautiously peered around doorjambes. I shut my door softly and locked it.

For the first time since I arrived in that hotel, I smiled.

Well, it was time to face it. I was different. I was not the same as my classmates from Stanville High School, not unless some of them were keeping a pretty big secret.

I saw several possibilities.

The first was that Dad had really given it to me that last time, inducing brain damage or other trauma to the point where I was dreaming the whole mess. Maybe even my mugging was just a detail added by my subconscious to correlate with the “real” injuries. I could be lying in the St. Mary’s Hospital intensive care unit back in Stanville, a little screen going beep, beep, beep over my still form. I doubted this, though. Even in my most terrifying nightmares I’ve had an awareness of the dream state. The stench of the garbage from the alleyway seemed too real.

The second possibility was that I’d done most of the things I remembered and most of the bad things that had happened to me had. My mind just warped reality in dealing with the results, giving to me the more palatable alternative of escape by a singular paranormal ability. This seemed more likely. Each time I’d “jumped” there was a feeling of unreality, of disorientation. This could be my shift into an irrational psychosis, an adjustment to a nasty reality. On the other hand, it could be the result of every sense reeling as the environment surrounding me changed completely. Hell—the very nature of the jump could be disorienting.

It was this third possibility that I distrusted the most. The one that meant I might finally be someone special. Not special in the sense of special education, not special in the sense of being a problem child, but unique, with a talent that, if anybody else had it, they hid. A talent for teleportation.

There, I’d thought the word. Teleportation.

“Teleportation.”

Aloud it vibrated in the room, a word of terrible import, alien to normal concepts of reality, brought into existence only under special circumstances, in the framework of fiction, film, and video.

And if I *was* teleporting, then how? Why me? What was it about me that made me able to teleport? And could anybody else? Is that what happened to Mom? Did she just teleport away from us?

Suddenly my stomach went hollow and I began breathing rapidly. *Jesus Christ! What if Dad can teleport?*

Suddenly the rooms seemed unsafe and I pictured him appearing before me, the belt in his hand, anywhere, anytime.

Get a grip. I’d never seen him do anything like that. Instead, I’d seen him stumble down the street a half mile to the Country Corner, to buy beer when he’d run out, hardly able to walk or talk. If he could teleport, surely he’d have used it then.

I sat on the narrow bed and dressed myself, putting on my most comfortable clothes. With extreme care, I combed my hair, checking the result in the tiny mirror on the wall. The bump, still large and aching, looked like a barber’s mistake. There was some slight seepage of blood, but it wasn’t really visible through the hair.

I wanted some aspirin and I wanted to know if I was crazy. I stood up and thought about the medicine cabinet in our house. It was funny that I still thought about it as *our* house. I wonder what my dad would say about that?

I didn’t know what time it was, other than after midnight. I wondered if Dad was asleep, awake, or even home. I compromised and thought, instead, of the large oak tree in the corner of the backyard. It was another place I used to read. It was also a place I used to go when Mom and Dad fought, where I couldn’t hear the words, even though the volume and anger still carried that far.

I jumped and my eyes opened on a yard that needed mowing. *I’ll bet that pisses him off.* I tried picturing him behind the mower, but I just couldn’t. I’d done the lawn since I was eleven. He used to

sit on the back porch with a beer in his hand and point out the spots I missed.

~~The house was dark. I moved carefully along until I could see the driveway. His car wasn't there.~~ I pictured the bathroom and jumped again.

The light was out. I flipped the switch and took a bottle of ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet. I was half full. I took a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and some gauze pads as well.

I jumped to the kitchen then, because I was hungry and to see if I still could. He'd bought groceries since the night I'd left for New York. I made myself two ham-and-cheese sandwiches and put them and the stuff from the bathroom in a paper bag I took from the pantry. Then I carefully cleaned up, trying to make it no more clean or messy than I'd found it. I drank two glasses of milk, then washed the glass and put it back in the cabinet.

There was the sound of tires in the driveway, that old sound of dread and tension. I picked up the bag and jumped back to the backyard. I didn't turn off the light, because he would have seen it through the window. I hoped he'd think he'd left it on himself, but I doubted it. He used to scream at me enough for leaving the lights on.

I watched the lights go on down the length of the house—front hall, living room, back hallway. The light in his bedroom went on, then off again. Then the light in my room went on and I saw him silhouetted in the window, a dark outline through the curtains. The light went out then and he walked back to the kitchen. He checked the back door to see if it was locked. I could see his face through the window, puzzled. He started to open the door and I ducked around the trunk of the oak.

"Davy?" he called out, barely raising his voice above conversational level. "Are you out there?"

I remained perfectly still.

I heard his feet scrape on the back porch and then the door shut again. I peered around the trunk and saw him through the kitchen window, taking a beer from the refrigerator. I sighed and jumped to the Stanville Library.

There was a couch with a coffee table in Periodicals that was away from the windows and had one of the lights they left on above it. That's where I ate my sandwiches, feet propped up, chewing and staring off into the dark corners. When I was done eating I washed three ibuprofen down at the water fountain, then used the bathroom.

It was a relief not having to worry about someone crashing through the door. I soaked a few gauze pads with hydrogen peroxide and dabbed at the cut on the back of my head. It stung more than the time before and the pad came away with fresh blood. I winced, but cleaned it as best I could. I didn't want to end up in a hospital with an infection.

I bagged the ibuprofen, gauze, and peroxide, then flushed the used gauze down the toilet. I jumped then, back to my hotel room in Brooklyn.

My head hurt and I was tired, but sleep was the last thing in the world on my mind.

It was time to see what I could do.

Chapter 3

In Washington Square Park I appeared before a bench that I'd sat upon two days previously. There was a man lying on it, shaking from the cold. He had newspapers tucked around his legs and his fists knotted in the collar of a dirty suit jacket, pulling it close around his neck. He opened his eyes, saw me, and screamed.

I blinked and took a step away from the bench. He sat up, grabbing for his newspapers before they blew away in the light breeze. He stared at me, wild-eyed, still shivering.

I jumped back to the hotel room in Brooklyn and took the blanket from the bed, then jumped back to the park.

He screamed again when I appeared, shrinking back onto the bench. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone." He repeated it over and over again.

Moving slowly, I put the blanket on the other end of his bench, then walked away down the walk MacDougal Street. When I'd walked fifty feet or so, I looked back at the bench. He'd picked up the blanket and wrapped it around himself, but he wasn't lying down yet. I wondered if someone was going to steal it from him before morning.

As I neared the street, two men, dark figures silhouetted by the streetlights, blocked my path. I looked over my shoulder so I wouldn't be taken by surprise again.

"Give us your wallet and your watch." There was the gleam of a knife in the streetlight; the other man hefted a length of something heavy and hard.

"Too late," I said. And jumped.

I appeared in the Stanville Library, back in front of the shelf that went from "Ruedinger, Cathy" to "Wells, Martha." I smiled. I hadn't had any particular destination in mind when I'd jumped, only escape. Every time I'd jumped from immediate, physical danger, I'd come here, to the safest haven I knew.

I mentally listed all the places I'd teleported to and considered them.

They were all places I'd frequented before jumping to them, either recently, in the case of Washington Square and the New York hotel, or repeatedly over a long period of time. They were places I could picture in my mind. I wondered if that was all it took.

I went to the card catalog and looked up New York. There was a listing under guidebooks, Dewey decimal 917.471. This led me to the *1986 Foster's Guide to New York City*. On page 323 there was a picture of the lake in Central Park, in color, with a bench and trash can in the foreground, the Loeb Boathouse to one side.

When Mom and I were touring New York, she wouldn't let us go farther into Central Park than the Metropolitan Museum on the park's east side. She'd heard too many stories of muggers and rapes, so we didn't get to see the boathouse. I'd never been there.

I stared at the picture until I could close my eyes and see it.

I jumped and opened my eyes.

I hadn't moved. I was still standing in the library.

Hmph.

I flipped the pages and tried the same thing with other places I hadn't been—Bloomingdale's, the Bronx Zoo, the interior of the base of the Statue of Liberty. None of them worked.

Then I hit a picture of the observation deck of the Empire State Building.

"Look, Mom, that's the Chrysler Building and you can see the World Trade Center and..."

"Shhhh, Davy. Modulate your voice, please."

That was Mom's expression, "Modulate your voice." Much kinder than saying "Shut up" or "Pipe down" or my dad's "Shut your hole." We'd gone there the second day of that trip and stayed up there an hour. Before I hit the picture I hadn't realized what an impression it made on me. I thought I only had hazy memories of it at best. But now I could remember it clearly.

I jumped and my ears popped, like they do when you take off and land in an airliner. I was standing there, the cold wind off the East River blowing my hair and ruffling the pages of the guidebook I still held in my hands. It was deserted. I looked down into the book and saw that the hours were listed as 9:30 to midnight.

So, I could jump to places I'd been, which was a relief in a way. *If* Dad could teleport, he wouldn't be able to jump into my hotel room in Brooklyn. He'd never been there.

The view was confusing, all the buildings lit, their actual outlines nebulous and blurring together. I saw a distant green floodlit figure and things fell into place. Liberty Island was south of the Empire State and I looked down Fifth Avenue toward Greenwich Village and downtown. The twin towers of the World Trade Center should have clued me in.

I could remember Mom feeding quarters into the mounted telescope so I could see the Statue of Liberty. We didn't go out to the island because Mom was queasy on boats.

I felt a wave of sorrow. Where had Mom gone?

I jumped, then, back to the library and replaced the guidebook on the shelf.

So, was it just any place I'd been?

My granddad, my mother's father, retired to a small house in Florida. My mom and I visited only once, when I was eleven. We were going to go again the next summer, but Mom left in the spring. I had a vague memory of a brightly painted house with white tile on the roof, and a canal in the back with boats. I tried to picture the living room but all I could picture was Granddad in this indefinite, generic sort of room. I tried to jump anyway, and it didn't work.

Hmph.

Memory was important, apparently. I had to have a clear picture of the place, gained from actually being there.

I thought of another experiment to make.

I jumped.

On Forty-fifth Street there is store after store specializing in electronics. Stereo equipment, video equipment, computers, electronic instruments. Everybody was closed when I appeared at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-fifth, including the vendor of Italian ice that I'd patronized the day before.

I could see into the stores, though, their interiors lit for security or display purposes. There were steel bars lowered over most of the windows, secured with massive padlocks, but you could peer between them.

I stopped before one store with wider bars and better lighting than most. I studied the floor, the walls, the way the shelves were arranged, the merchandise closest to the window.

I had a very real sense of location. I was here on the sidewalk just six feet from the inside of the store. I could picture it clearly in my mind. I looked up the street both ways, closed my eyes, and jumped.

Two things happened. First, I appeared inside the store, inches from hundreds of bright, shiny electronic toys. Second, within an instant of my appearance, a siren, very loud and strident, went off both inside and outside the store, followed by the blinding flash of an electronic strobe which lit the interior like a bolt of lightning.

Jesus! I flinched. Then, almost without thought, I jumped back to the Stanville Library.

My knees felt weak. I sat, quickly, on the floor and shook for over a minute.

~~What was the matter with me? It was just an alarm, some sort of motion detector. I didn't have this reaction when the two thugs in Washington Square accosted me.~~

I calmed down. That hadn't been so unexpected, so abrupt. I took several deep breaths. I could probably have stayed there, transferred several VCRs back to my hotel room, before the police showed up.

What would I do with them? I wouldn't know who to sell them to, not without getting ripped off or busted. The very thought of dealing with the kind of people who bought stolen goods made my skin crawl. And what about the store owner? Wouldn't he be hurt? Or would insurance cover it? I started feeling guilty just picturing it.

Another thought set my heart to beating harder and faster. *Maybe that flash was for photos? Maybe they have closed-circuit TV cameras set up?*

I stood up and started pacing across the library, breathing faster, almost gasping.

"Stop it!" I finally said to myself, my voice loud in the quiet building. *How the hell are they going to catch you, even if they had your fingerprints, which they don't? If they did catch you, what jail would hold you? Hell, no merchandise was stolen, no locks forced, no windows broken. Who's going to believe there was someone in the store, much less press charges?*

Suddenly, like a weight descending on my shoulders, I was exhausted, weaving on my feet. My head began to ache again, and I wanted to sleep.

I jumped to the hotel room and kicked off my shoes. The room was chilly, the radiator barely warm. I looked at the thin sheets on the bed. *Inadequate.* I thought about the man in Washington Square Park. *Is he warm enough?*

I jumped into the dark interior of my room in my father's house, scooped up the quilt from the bed, and jumped back to the hotel room.

Then I slept.

It was midday when noise from the street, a horn I think, woke me. I pulled the quilt higher and looked at the cheap hotel room.

It was Wednesday, so I thought my dad should be at the office. I stood up, stretched, and jumped to the bathroom in the house. I listened carefully, then peered around the corner. Nobody. I jumped to the kitchen and looked out at the driveway. His car wasn't there. I used the bathroom, then, and had breakfast.

I can't live off my father forever. The thought made my stomach hurt. What was I going to do about money?

I jumped back to the hotel room and sorted through my clothes for something clean to wear. I was running out of underwear and all of my socks were dirty. I considered going to a store, picking out a selection of clothing, and then jumping without paying the bill. The ultimate shoplifter.

Real class, Davy. I shook my head violently, gathered up all my dirty clothes, and jumped back to my father's house.

There—more and more, I was thinking of it as *his* house, not ours. I considered that a good step.

Well, *he* had left some of *his* clothes in the washing machine without moving them to the dryer. From the smell of the mildew, they'd been there a couple of days. I piled them on the dryer, then started a load of my clothes.

If it was *his* house, then why was I there? *He owes me at least the odd meal and load of laundry.* I refused to feel guilty for taking anything from him.

Of course, while the washer ran, I paced through the house and felt guilty.

It wasn't the food, or doing laundry. I felt guilty about the twenty-two hundred I took from his wallet. It was stupid. The man made good money but made me wear secondhand clothes. He drove a car that cost over twenty thousand dollars but kept me, so he wouldn't have to pay my mom child support.

And I still felt guilty. Angry, too.

I thought about trashing the place, tearing up all the furniture, and burning his clothes. I considered coming back tonight, opening his Cadillac's gas tank and lighting it off. Maybe the house would catch fire, too.

What am I doing? Every minute I stood in that house made me feel angrier. And the angrier I got, the more guilty I felt. *This is not worth it.* I jumped to Manhattan and walked through Central Park, until I was calm again.

After forty minutes, I jumped back to Dad's house, took the clothes out of the washer and put them in the dryer. Dad's mildewed clothes I put back in the washing machine.

There was something else I needed from the house. I went down the hall to Dad's den—his "office." I wasn't supposed to go in there, but I was a little past caring about his rules and regulations. I started in the three-drawer filing cabinet, then moved to his desk. By the time the clothes were finished drying, I was finished, too, but I hadn't found my birth certificate anywhere.

I slammed the last drawer shut, then gathered my dried clothes up and jumped back to the hotel room.

What am I going to do about money?

I put the clothes on the bed, then jumped to Washington Square, in front of the park bench. There was no sign of the sleeper from the night before. Two old women sat there, deep in conversation. They glanced up at me, but kept on talking; I walked down the sidewalk.

I'd tried to get honest work. They wouldn't take me without a social security number. Most of them also wanted proof of citizenship—either a birth certificate or a voter's registration. I had none of these. I thought about illegal aliens working in the U.S. How did they get around this problem?

They buy fake documents.

Ah. When I'd walked down Broadway in Time's Square, several guys had offered me everything from drugs to women to little boys. I bet they'd also know about fake IDs.

But I have no money.

I felt very third world, caught in a trap between needing money to make money and no superpower's loan in sight. If I didn't pay my hotel bill the next day, I was also back out on the street. I would need some form of debt relief.

The shriek from the Forty-second Street burglar alarm seemed less frightening in broad daylight. I thought about stealing VCRs or TVs and hocking them at pawn shops, then using the money to try and buy fake ID.

The thought of carrying a VCR into a pawnshop frightened me. I didn't care that I was uncatchable. If someone was itchy enough I might take a bullet. Perhaps I was being paranoid. If I stole something worth more? Jewelry? Go to the museum and rip off paintings? The more expensive the item, the more chance I had of not making any money from it, getting ripped off or killed.

Maybe the government would hire me?

I shuddered. I read *Firestarter* by Stephen King. I could imagine being dissected to find out how they did this thing. Or drugged so I wouldn't do it—that's how they controlled the father in that book. Keep him on drugs so he couldn't think straight. I wondered if they already had people who could teleport.

Stay away from the government. Don't let anyone know what I can do!

Well, then—I guessed I'd have to steal money itself.

~~The Chemical Bank of New York is on Fifth Avenue. I walked in and asked the guard if there was a bathroom in the bank. He shook his head.~~

“Up the street at the Trump Tower. They have a rest room in the lobby.”

I looked distressed. “Look, I really don’t mean to be a problem, but my dad’s meeting me here in just a few moments, and if I’m not here he’ll *kill* me, but I really got to pee. Isn’t there an employees rest room somewhere?”

I didn’t think he’d buy it, but the lie, plus any mention of my father, was making my distress real. He looked doubtful and I winced, knowing he was going to send me away.

“Ah, what the hell. See that door there?” He pointed to a door past the long line of teller’s windows. “Go through there and straight back. The bathroom is on the right at the end of the hall. If anyone gives you a problem, tell them Kelly sent you.”

I let out a lungful of air. “Thanks, Mr. Kelly. You’ve saved my life.”

I went through the door as if I knew what I was doing. My stomach was churning and I felt sure that everyone who passed me could read my intentions and knew I was a criminal.

The vault was two doors before the bathroom. Its huge steel door hung on hinges larger than myself, open, but a smaller door of bars within was shut and a guard sat before it, at a small table. I paused before him, looking past him to the interior of the vault. He looked up at me.

“Can I help you?” His voice was cold and he stared at me like a high school principal looks at a student without a hall pass.

I stammered, “I’m looking for the bathroom.”

The guard said, “There are no *public* rest rooms in this bank.”

“Mr. Kelly said I could use the employees’ rest room. It’s kind of an emergency.”

He relaxed a little. “End of the hall then. It’s certainly not *here*.”

I bobbed my head. “Right. Thank you.” I walked on. I really hadn’t gotten a good enough look. I went into the bathroom and washed my hands.

On the way back I stopped and said, “That sure is a huge door. Do you know how much it weighs?” I stepped a bit closer.

The guard looked annoyed. “A lot. If you’re quite through using the bathroom, I would appreciate it if you returned to the lobby!”

I pivoted. “Oh, certainly.” I stared at the door again from my new angle. I saw carts and a table up against one of vault’s interior doors. The carts had canvas bags on them, as well as stacks of bundled money. Another step and I glimpsed gray steel shelves against another wall.

Got it!

The guard started to stand up. I looked away from the door and saw his face color.

“On my way,” I said. “Thanks for your directions.”

He growled something, but I walked briskly down the hall. As I walked past the lobby guard, I smiled. “Thanks, Mr. Kelly.” He waved and I went out the door.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the library, back in Stanville, first reading the encyclopedia entries under Banks, Bank Robberies, Alarm Systems, Safes, Vaults, Time Locks, and Closed-Circuit Television, then skimming a book on industrial security systems that I found in Applied Technologies.

“David? David Rice?”

I looked up. Mrs. Johnson, my geography teacher from Stanville High School, was walking toward me. I looked at the clock—school had been out for an hour.

I hadn’t been to school in three weeks, ever since the first day I had jumped. I felt my face get ho

and I stood up.

~~“It really is you, David. I’m glad to see you’re all right. Have you gone home then?”~~

For some reason I was surprised that the school knew I’d run away. I started to agree. It was so much easier to lie, to say I’d come back and that I’d be in school tomorrow. I know that’s what I would have done a month before. Take the path of least resistance. Avoid fuss. Say whatever was necessary to keep people from being mad at me.

I hated for people to be mad at me.

I shook my head. “No, ma’am. I haven’t. And I’m not going to.”

She didn’t seem shocked or even surprised. “Your father seems very worried. He came up to the school and talked to all your classes, asking if anyone had seen you. He’s also put up those posters... well, you’ve probably seen them around town.”

I blinked, then shrugged. *Posters?*

“What about school?” she asked. “What are you going to do about classes? How are you going to go to college? Or get a job?”

“I... I guess I’ll have to make other arrangements.” I felt good about not lying to her, but was still afraid she was going to disapprove of me. “I tried to take the GED,” I said. “But they won’t let a seventeen-year-old take it without parental permission or a court order.”

Mrs. Johnson licked her lower lip, then asked, “Where are you staying, David? Are you getting enough to eat?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m okay.”

Her words seemed chosen very carefully. It dawned on me that she wasn’t going to bawl me out for missing school or for running away. It was as if she was trying to avoid spooking me—avoid scaring me off.

“I’m going to phone your father, David. It’s my duty. However, if you like we can talk to the county social worker. You don’t have to go home if you don’t want to.” She hesitated and then finally said, “Does he abuse you, David?”

The tears came then, like an anvil falling out of a clear blue sky. I thought I was fine up until then. I squeezed my eyes shut, and my shoulders were shaking. I kept quiet, stifling the sobs.

Mrs. Johnson took a step toward me, I think to hug me. I recoiled, stepping back and turning away, wiping furiously at my eyes with my right hand.

She dropped her arms to her side. She looked unhappy.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, then two more, the shakes gradually diminishing. “Sorry,” I said.

Mrs. Johnson spoke then, softly, carefully. “I won’t call your father, but only if you come see Mr. Mendoza with me. He’ll know what to do.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m doing okay. I don’t want to go see Mr. Mendoza.”

She looked even more unhappy. “Please, Davy. It’s not safe on the street, even in Stanville, Ohio. We can protect you from your father.”

Oh, yeah? Where were you for the last five years? I shook my head again. This was going nowhere.

“Do you still drive a gray VW, Mrs. Johnson?” I said, looking over her shoulder.

She blinked, surprised by the change of subject. “Yes.”

“I think somebody just hit it.”

She turned her head quickly. Before she figured out that you couldn’t see the parking lot from where we were standing, I jumped back to the Brooklyn hotel.

God damn it all to hell! I threw the industrial-security book across the room, then scrambled to get it, a wave of guilt washing over me, both about getting angry and about mistreating a library book. Books didn’t deserve to be abused... did people?

I curled up on the bed and pulled the pillow over my head.

It was dark when I sat up, dazed and uncomprehending, waking in slow, confusing stages. For a moment I looked around, expecting to find Mrs. Johnson standing over me and telling me many fascinating facts about western Africa, but I woke up a little more and the dim light coming through the thin shade revealed the room, my condition, my state of being.

I stood up and stretched, wondered what time it was, and jumped to the Stanville Library to look their wall clock. It was 9:20 P.M. in Ohio, and the same in New York. Time to get to work.

I jumped to my backyard, behind the oak tree. Dad's car was in the driveway, but the only lights on were in his room, the den, and my room. *What's he doing with my room?* I felt panic rising, but forced it down. *Ignore it. You'll be able to get to your room.*

The gardening stuff was in the garage, on a shelf above the lawn mower. Rakes, shovels, and a hoe hung on nails across the wall below the shelf. I appeared before this collection and groped past insecticides, fertilizer, grass seed until my hands closed on the old gardening gloves. I put them on, then jumped to the front driveway.

Dad's Caddy gleamed in the streetlight, a huge, hulking beast. I walked to the passenger side and tried the door, gently. It was locked. I looked in, at the plush upholstery and the gleaming dash. I could vividly remember the smell of it, the feel of the seats. I closed my eyes and jumped.

The car alarm went off with a whooping shriek, but I was expecting it. I opened the glove compartment and took the flashlight. The porch light came on and the front door started to open. I jumped to my room.

The alarm sounded a great deal quieter from here, but still unpleasant. I was sure that porch lights were coming on all over the neighborhood.

The ski mask was in the bottom drawer of my dresser, buried under several pairs of too-small long underwear. I found it just as the car alarm stopped. I started to jump, then realized I didn't have the flashlight in my hand. I looked around the room and saw it on the dresser.

The front door shut and I heard footsteps in the hallway. I picked up the flashlight and jumped.

The gloves were leather, old and stiff. They hurt my fingers just to bend them. The ski mask was large enough, even though it was four years old. All the stretch was gone and it was pulled out of shape, but I thought it would work. Positioned right, it covered all of my face except my eyes and the bridge of my nose. The bottom half hung loosely over the rest of my face, but it concealed it.

It itched like hell.

I jumped.

I appeared in a pitch black room with dead air and a smooth floor. I waited a moment before I turned on the light, steeling myself for the scream of an alarm. I was also afraid I wasn't in the right place and didn't want to rush the moment of failure's discovery.

I didn't hear any alarms, though, for all I knew, lights could be flashing on a dozen monitor consoles from the bank all the way to the police station. If there were other teleporters in the world, wouldn't banks know about them and take measures? Like flooding the vault with poison gas when it was locked? Or booby traps? The air around me turned thick, and the darkness pressed in on me until I thought that perhaps the very walls were moving in. I flicked the flashlight switch without conscious volition.

So much money!

The carts I'd seen earlier were stacked high—either with neatly bundled piles of money or with trays of rolled coins or rough canvas bags with "Chemical Bank of New York" stenciled on their side.

Most of the shelves held bundled stacks of new bills.

~~I closed my eyes, suddenly dizzy. By the vault door there was a light switch. I turned it on and fluorescent lighting lit the room. There didn't seem to be any TV cameras in the vault, and I couldn't see any little boxes on the wall that looked like any of the heat sensors I'd read about that afternoon. No gas flooded from vents. No booby traps sprang into action.~~

I turned off the flashlight and went to work.

The first cart I came to was obviously from the previous day's deposits. The money was definitely used, though bundled neatly. I picked up a stack of one-hundred-dollar bills. The paper band wrapped around the middle said "\$5,000" and was stamped with the Chemical Bank's name. There was a cardboard box on another cart. It was filled with packets of one-dollar bills, each packet holding fifty bills. I tried to estimate how deep the stack went, then shook my head. *Count later, Davy.*

I picked up the box and jumped to the hotel room. I dumped it on the bed, then jumped back.

I started at one end and moved to the other. If the packets looked new, I checked to see if the bills were in serial-number order. If they were I left them. If they weren't I put them in the box. When the box was full, I jumped to the hotel room, dumped the contents on the bed, and jumped back.

When I was done with the loose money on the carts, I checked the bags. They seemed to be transfer deposits from subbranches, all in used bills. I took all the bags, without checking the contents of the others. Money was already spilling off the edges of the bed so I put the bags on the floor, under the bed.

The shelves held new bills, the range of their serial numbers neatly written on their paper bands. I left them and took a last look around. Still no ringing alarms. The door was solidly shut.

It didn't matter. If what I had read about time clocks was true, it would take a very special set of circumstances to open the door before the next morning, even if alarms were ringing.

For one brief second I considered leaving a thank-you note, perhaps even some spray-painted graffiti, but decided against it.

I imagined there would be enough excitement the next morning without that.

I jumped.

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