

# SIGNS FROM THE EDGE

## CHAPTER ONE

Diane Naab

Thomas, Jason, and Sally were hanging out at the local laundromat on Capitol Hill on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

Sally looked at her watch. “Oh. I’m going to be late for my hair appointment. Could one of you put my things in the dryer with yours? I’d re-e-ally appreciate it. Call me later. Thanks.”

Her smile and demeanor managed to undo Thomas a bit. Jason was only slightly amused and continued reading an old James Patterson paperback he found in the window.

Thomas, the older of the two men, spoke up and assured her he would take care of it. Trying to come across as aloof, he merely glanced at her over his reading glasses and returned to his crossword puzzle. His heart raced a little at the thought of her lingerie mingling with his own rather bland socks, sweats, and button-down shirts. His mind strayed as Sally left the laundromat, thinking he might do a little shopping later. Yes. Maybe Armani. The underwear Beck wore in those old ads in GQ. He sat smiling to himself at the thought when Jason jolted him out of his fantasy.

“Hey. There’s a dryer available if you want it. I’m out of here.”

Thomas scrambled to his feet to attend to Sally’s laundry that had just completed the spin cycle. He carefully removed each item when he realized he was being scrutinized by his overbearing landlady, Mrs. Donovan, who had just walked in with a load of towels. He could only nod in her direction as he held a pink lace-trimmed push-up bra with panties to match.

“Well now. What have we here?”

“Oh, well. You know. Sally. These are hers, of course. I uh...she’s busy and...”

Mrs. Donovan stared at him then sauntered to the washer. “Not my business.” With her back to him her shoulders began to vibrate as she struggled to keep from laughing out loud. She barely said “Whatever,” when she exploded.

“Well, it’s not so funny. I mean...these aren’t mine.”

She gasped for air. “Of course not. Pink isn’t your color. Anyone can see that.”

Thomas walked back to his apartment, deciding not to go shopping after all.

## CHAPTER TWO

Paddy Eger

Thomas shifted the laundry he carried to dig his apartment key from his pocket. He still felt like kicking himself for letting his landlady get to him. She was always saying things about him and Sally as if they were a couple. That was nonsense. They were just friends who lived on the same floor in the Capitol Hill Apartment for four years and two months. Sure, Sally was cute and easy to talk with, but she wasn't his type. He'd only tossed her unmentionables in with his drying load as a favor; he was just being neighborly. Besides, why not help a friend even though handling her bras and panties made him fidgety. Maybe when Sally came for her laundry he'd suggest she get a laundry service. She could afford it.

Jason was the one who had a crush on her. He used his ever-present paperback as a foil so he could watch her without getting caught by anyone, or so he thought. Thomas was on to him but kept out of it, enjoying their interactions.

Meanwhile, Sally had hurried off on a typical Saturday afternoon shopping spree. She'd wandered through the high-end shops and hit the shoe sales at Nordstrom's but only came away with one handbag and two pairs of high heels, plus a pair of Bomba socks for Thomas. He seriously needed to jazz up his totally boring clothes. How did he ever get a date wearing those tacky grunge outfits? Come to think of it, he didn't date.

As Sally approached her apartment she looked toward Thomas and Jason's unit. Her mouth dropped open. There, hanging on the doorknob was a barely-there black push-up bra. She dropped her purchases, grabbed the bra from the handle and banged on the door with both fists.

When the door opened, she held the bra forward, close to Thomas's face. "What's the meaning of this? Why is it on your doorknob?"

Thomas turned several shades of red as he backed away. "I don't know."

"Oh, hi, Sally," Jason said as he hurried up the stairs and walked toward the apartment. "You should be asking me. Landlady Donovan handed it to me as I came into the building earlier." Then, pointing to Thomas, he smiled and slowly said. "*Someone* left it in the dryer."

Before any conversation got started, Jason checked his watch. "Guys, we're late. The crowd's already gathered at Karl's Kosmic Karaoke Kitchen. Tonight's the night, remember?"

## CHAPTER THREE

Gerald M. Bigelow

Jason felt a cold bead of sweat slowly sliding down his right temple, determined to find its way to settle in his right ear. Panic stricken, Jason remembered, he had forgotten to pick up his reclusive uncle, known to the community as “Weather Beaten Bill.” Jason was Bill’s only connection to the outside world. Bill had spent the majority of his adult life as a soldier of fortune. Without a war, he had become a soldier of mis-fortune—lost, living in a world of swirling images and vague memories.

Jason knew that he was taking his life in his hands by entering Bill’s home without knocking. Yet he took the chance, speaking Bill’s name as he walked in. He spied Bill sitting in his usual position in the middle of the floor of his one-room shack. Bill barely moved to acknowledge Jason’s presence. Jason noticed a low rumble of a whisper, emanating from Bill’s lips. Jason drew closer to catch the gist of Uncle Bill’s utterances. A song, a poem?

“Living in Tennessee, playing Monopoly, beneath the entangled roots of a Banyan Tree . . .” Seeing Bill, scribing verse on a coffee stained napkin and mumbling at the same time was a bit disconcerting. Bill struggled to grasp a stub of a pencil, pockmarked with the impressions of teeth forged in moments of deep contemplation and nervous jitters.

“Uncle Bill, we’ve got to go! I fed the dogs as I came in. We just have to get them harnessed up to the sled.” The moon was full and the Northern Lights were dancing across the sky leaving rainbowed spotlights across the snow.

Bill arose purposefully as if awakened from a deep sleep. Still not uttering a word, his movements were deliberate as he reached for his fur-lined parka and sealskin boots. He made some random hand gestures and uttered a few unintelligible words as he and Jason moved toward the front door. Grabbing Jason by the collar, Uncle Bill spun him around and they stood nose to nose. For the very first time Jason saw unbridled fear, in Uncle Bill’s eyes.

“Uncle Bill, what’s wrong?”

“There is no wrong, just the plan.”

“What plan?”

Before Bill could answer, the dogs grew restless and began to howl. Suddenly, as if on cue, all sounds ceased, silence overtook the presence of the night. The familiar crunching sound when stepping on crusted snow failed to occur. The rustling sound of deep labored breathing that happens in subzero temperatures failed to materialize.

Jason was starting to feel like he was becoming a prisoner of his own thoughts. If sound no longer existed how would he issue commands to the dogs? How would he and Uncle Bill communicate? Undeterred, he and Uncle Bill set about harnessing the dogs. Conversations became relegated to a few head nods and some random hand signals. Jason issued a silent “mush.” Though restless, the dogs failed to take even a single step forward. Given the circumstances, they were most definitely going to be late arriving at the Annual Mukluk Festival.

Bill got off of the sled and approached the lead dog. With a friendly pat on the head and a symbol written in the snow, the team slowly started to move, giving Bill just enough time to remount the sled.

After the long and arduous trip through deep snow and total silence, the lights of the festival came into view. At that very moment, as quick as it came, the silence was gone. Barely noticeable, the ground began to shift. Bill started to laugh as the ground broke away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Susan Frederick

As he floated down a vertical tunnel with walls made of ice, Jason remembered his mother reading *Alice in Wonderland* back when he was a kid living in Seattle, and now he understood how Alice must have felt. From somewhere above him, he could hear Uncle Bill's froggy voice shouting down to him.

"See Jason? I told you there was a plan!"

"Uncle Bill, what in the world is going on?" Jason yelled back up in the direction of his uncle's voice.

Bill was singing now, and the words of his song bounced off the icy walls that surrounded them. "Living in Tennessee, playing Monopoly..."

After what seemed like only a few minutes, Jason floated down onto a perfectly manicured lawn in a park-like setting. He looked around and knew he wasn't in Alaska anymore. A few seconds later, his uncle floated down and landed on the grass across from him. As Jason shook his head hoping to clear the confusion in his brain, he noticed that there was a Monopoly board open between them. Sunlight peeked through the broad canopy of a gigantic banyan tree spread out above them.

"Isn't this just beautiful?" Uncle Bill asked, spreading his arms wide, lifting his face to the sun, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to go from subzero temperatures in Alaska to a park in the middle of Tennessee. *Just like that.*

Jason knew that his Uncle Bill had always been somewhat eccentric, but this was ridiculous. And besides, Jason had his own plan, and it didn't include a banyan tree, Tennessee or monopoly. "Uncle Bill, what about the Mukluk Festival? And where is the sled? And the dogs?"

"They're just fine, Jason. They made it there. Someone'll take of them, don't you worry."

Of course Jason was worrying, and not just about the dogs and the sled.

“Uncle Bill, how did we get here?” he asked, knowing there was no reasonable explanation. “And why did you look so scared back at your place?”

His uncle looked at him, as if he was considering how much to say. “I just kinda felt like I had to get away from there. Too many memories, Jason. Just too many memories.”

Jason knew that his uncle had PTSD from his war experiences. Jason wondered if somehow, he’d become trapped in Bill’s illusions and fantasies. He thought about Roberta, who would be waiting for him at the Festival. He imagined she’d be wearing her traditional Kuspuk dress– the blue one – and her sealskin mukluks. What would she think when the dogs and sled arrived without him or Uncle Bill? Ever since they’d started first grade together at the village school, Jason had loved Roberta Chingliak. He loved walking across the tundra with her to school. He loved the way her smile made her eyes almost close. He loved looking at her perfect, round face surrounded by the wolverine fur on her parka. And he loved her sense of humor. She never seemed to mind that he was a white kid and she was Yu’pik.

“You’re okay,” she’d say, a little smile on her face. “I like you anyway.”

His uncle’s voice broke into his reverie. “It’s your turn.”

“Huh?”

“I said it’s your turn. Shake the dice.”

Jason stood up and looked down at his uncle. “Look, Uncle Bill, this is all great and everything, but I don’t want to be here.”

“Why the heck not?” his uncle asked. “It’s better than freezing our asses off up there in the frigid north, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. How in the heck did we get here? I don’t get any of this.”

Bill looked up at Jason. His eyebrows went up and a small smile began in the corners of his mouth.

“Ah ha, I get it,” he said. “It’s that girl, isn’t it?”



Jason took a deep breath. “Okay, yes. She’s going to be all worried about us, and so will everyone else. Don’t you care about that?”

“Son, they quit worrying about me a long time ago.”

“Okay, I get that,” Jason said. “But Roberta, she’ll be worrying about me.”

Just then, Jason heard a rustle behind him. He turned around to see two elderly ladies.

“Hello there, Bill, it’s been awhile,” one of them said, smiling at Bill.

“Lucille and Ruby, how are you on this fine day?” Bill answered.

Jason looked back and forth, from the ladies to his uncle, getting more confused by the minute.

“I apologize,” Bill said, getting up now. “May I introduce my nephew, Jason? Jason, this is Lucille and Ruby, two dear friends of mine.”

“How...how do you do,” Jason said.

“We do quite well, thank you,” the one named Lucille answered, smiling.

As they wandered away, the one named Ruby called back over her shoulder, “See you at dinner, Bill.”

“You sure will,” Bill called back. Then he looked at Jason. “So, you want to go back, do you? To the frigid north.”

“Yes, Uncle Bill. I want to go back.”

“Alright, son. Back it is.”

Bill picked up a small twig that was on the ground and began writing some symbols in the sand surrounding the banyan tree. Jason couldn’t believe what happened next.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Cynthia Heckman

The symbols his uncle was drawing seemed strangely familiar to Jason. It was as if they were in a language he'd known before he was born. Uncle Bill dropped the crooked stick he'd been using to scrawl in the dirt. He stood over his nephew and looked him straight in the eye.

"Roll up your left pants leg." he demanded.

Jason stared back at him without comprehension.

"Just do it, Jason!"

Jason loosened his boot and carefully rolled up his pants leg revealing a thick wool sock, so unsuitable for the warm southern afternoon. There, on his calf, was a tattoo of the very same symbols his uncle had etched into the ground next to the Monopoly board.

The symbols glowed slightly under the shadow of the great tree, as if a little bit of sunshine had been used in the ink that made them. Suddenly Jason knew that this strange day was not all about his crazy uncle. It was about him. It was about finding out who he is and who he could be. It was as if he were transformed into a character in his own book, like Harry Potter or a hero of Greek myth.

"The power to go home, Jason, or really, to go anywhere, is all yours." his uncle said. "It always has been. It is my gift to you to show you what already belongs to you. It may be the only thing I have worth giving." Uncle Bill sat down next to him, leaning against one of the larger banyan roots. "To get back to Alaska, all you have to do is concentrate on exactly where and when you want to be. Or you could stay here in Tennessee with me, and have dinner with Lucille and Ruby to learn how and why this power came to be yours. Take a few minutes and think it over."

Time stopped as Jason pondered his predicament. The Mukluk Festival, Alaska, and sweet Roberta felt more like dreams than reality. If he weren't wearing this ridiculous dog sledding gear he wouldn't be sure who he was. He took off his coat.

Here, in this moment, little brown birds were flitting and tweeting overhead in the tree's wide canopy. Large black flies buzzed around Uncle Bill's face, attracted by the heady smell of sweat and aftershave.

Uncle Bill waited, not quite patiently. He rolled the dice on the Monopoly Board and aimlessly moved the tiny metal boot around the spaces. Jason smiled as he watched. Even without an opponent his uncle cheated. He avoided landing on Luxury Tax in favor of Boardwalk. He cut corners to pass GO and collect \$200. And he refused to go to jail, go directly to jail.

Jason took the dice from the board and felt the hard, cool cubes in his palm. He looked at them on all six sides, noticing how the black paint which was used to mark the indentations on the three was applied sloppily. He thought, "Nothing seems perfect if you look at it too closely."

Jason gripped the dice loosely in his hands, shook them up and rolled them across the board. Double sixes. He picked up the little silver dog and moved it twelve spaces from the "just visiting" zone of the jail, around the corner to the big question mark.

"Alright, Uncle. Time to take a Chance and roll again."

## CHAPTER SIX

Nicki Chen

Considering the curious events of the day so far, Jason might be excused for wondering whether the card he chose from the *Chance* pile was a sign. “ADVANCE TO GO,” he read out loud, glancing at Uncle Bill. “Collect \$200.”

“Two hundred bucks, huh?” his uncle said, as though they were simply playing an ordinary game of Monopoly. As though Jason hadn’t fallen through a rabbit hole into a strange new reality where a symbol drawn in the dirt with a stick matched a tattoo that magically appeared on his leg. It wasn’t entirely crazy to think that a *Chance* card would be a sign.

Cousin Lucille counted out the money. Then she gave a flirty flip of her hair and handed it to him. He supposed she was kind of cute, in a Tennessee sort of way. But she was old, probably over twenty.

“Well folks ....” Aunt Ruby stuffed her skirt between her legs and gave herself a push off the grass with both hands. “Whew!” she said, panting from the exertion. “I’ll just go start dinner. You are staying, aren’t you, Jason?”

“Uh ....” He wasn’t sure he had a choice. “Uh, sure. I guess so.”

Uncle Bill winked at him.

This whole thing was crazy. Jason needed to go back home. His dogs were in top shape, his sled ready to go. This year he could actually win the Mukluk Race. Ignoring Uncle Bill, who was probably cheating again, he unlaced his heavy boots and pulled them off. This place, this Tennessee, was hot as a tugboat engine room. He yanked off his thick wool socks. Then he pushed his left pant leg up, and examined the mysterious tattoo on his left calf. Spitting on his fingers, he rubbed it as hard as he could.

“It’s not coming off, boy,” Uncle Bill said. “It’s yours now, for as long as you live.”

He turned to Lucille. “Did you know about it, my ... power?” He whispered the word.

Lucille giggled. “Sure. I knew about it.”

“And Aunt Ruby, did she know too?”

“Of course.”

Jason frowned at Uncle Bill. “Then why didn’t I know until today?”

“Because ...” Uncle Bill smirked, as though he’d asked a stupid question, “you hadn’t reached the age of knowing yet.”

“This isn’t my birthday.”

“Birthday, shmerthday. Do you think our way of counting time is the only way there is?”

“No, but ....”

“Well, there you go.” Uncle Bill skipped his little metal boot over INCOME TAX and Reading Railroad and slammed it down on Oriental Avenue. “Ah ha!” he crowed. “A house, if you will, Miss Lucille.”

“Does my dad have the power?” Jason slapped a mosquito on his ankle, tiny by Alaska standards, but darned itchy.

“Does my grandpa have it?”

Lucille sat up straight and looked at him sideways. “So why didn’t you ask about your mother and your grandmother?” she asked in a quarrelsome tone.

Jason pushed out his bottom lip and leaned back on his elbows. He figured he could ask about anyone he pleased. Besides, it was darn hot here, and he was tired. He closed his eyes and thought about home. Behind his eyelids, he saw a thin, slanting light shining in the kitchen window, falling on Mom’s cheek as she set the table. He could hear the dogs outside and Dad stomping his feet on the doormat. And ....

“Hells bells!”

Suddenly Uncle Bill’s hand was clamped around his arm, pulling him down.

“Where the hell do you think you’re goin’, boy? Didn’t I tell you, you gotta be careful with this power? Like I said, I’m gonna explain the whole thing to you over dinner. Now throw the dice, and let’s finish this game of Monopoly.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Valerie Spasojevic

He felt like a balloon afloat a warm, dreamy river of wind, a dumb smile smeared across his placid face. The moment passed when he felt the grip and tug of his “uncle’s” meaty hand pulling him back to the ground. A wave of dark impatience, like the feeling of escaping into a warm house in sub-zero weather, brought Jason’s mind and body back together. The reality of what may be a new life slowly sinking in. He thought back to the moment, just a few weeks earlier, when he was looking forward to taking a break from the eternal Alaskan winter and meeting this *new* family in Tennessee.

“Jason, it’s your turn.” Uncle Bill urged

“My turn,” he whispered, cocking his head and squinting his eyes, wondering what on earth that really meant now that he felt like a loaded coil.

Uncle Bill gestured to continue the game. Jason’s leg felt icy hot where the conspicuous tattoo had emerged. He hated the game Monopoly since the first time he played as a kid. The last thing he wanted was to monopolization anything. He picked up the dice and rolled. Snake eyes. Jason sighed. Not only did his roll bite like a bad omen, but it also placed his marker on Board Walk. Now he owed his uncle for rent and lodging. He flipped through his play money, handing over the large sum wondering which he dreaded more—the continuation of this horrid game or Aunt Ruby’s call for dinner.

“Jason,” Uncle Bill said with the firmness of someone who has just committed themselves to an act outside of their comfort zone. “Without getting into the details of your abilities just yet, I can at least explain what will become obvious as soon as I tell you. We are a family bound by something more ancient than life itself and stronger than blood. I know that’s a bold statement, but you’re just going to have to trust me.”

Uncle Bill sighed and continued, “You were right not to ask about your mother or grandmother. This gift attaches to the Y chromosomes only. In some ways I believe this befell on our gender as a result of frailty. But, like a young bone that is broken, the strength manifests twofold in its healing. You following me so far?”

He glanced sideways at Lucille. She was picking at blades of grass, suddenly stiffening with this news.

“Girls can’t have the gift?” Lucille gasped.

“I’m sorry sweetie. I was going to tell you soon enough,” her uncle said.

Aunt Ruby called for dinner, breaking Lucille’s bubble of disbelief.

Jason was starving by now. He hopped up, extending his hand to Uncle Bill and tugged him upward just as his uncle had tugged moments before. “This turnabout is not fair play,” he thought.

As they walked toward the house, Jason began to convulse.

Lucille let out a giggle now that she knew she was free of “the gift.”

Uncle Bill pulled out what looked like a pen from his shirt pocket and jabbed it into Jason’s neck.

“Wow, your biological reaction to the powers is stronger than in most I’ve seen. This shot contains nanobots. You’ll feel better soon. Keep moving,” he ordered.

Jason half walked, half stumbled up the stairs and into the dining room. He grabbed the nearest chair and sat. A glass of cold lemonade was on the table waiting for him. Reaching out with a trembling hand, he grasped the glass and gulped. The coolness and sugar made him feel much better.

With everyone seated, Aunt Ruby scooped a heap of mashed potatoes, plopping them onto her plate and cleared her throat. “How shall we proceed?” she asked. “Your questions first or an explanation of how these powers came to you and what your role is now?”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Laura Kemp

Jason was torn between asking about these mysterious more-ancient-than-life-itself powers or ploughing into his cooling mound of potatoes. Maybe his powers allowed him to do both.

“Tell me about these abilities. This, uh . . . gift,” he said, keeping most of a large spoonful of buttery spuds in his mouth. “More ancient than life itself? Really?” Jason swallowed and pointed down the table. “Pass the salt, please.” He was glad Lucille had eaten earlier and was reading in her room. She didn’t need to hear about all this right now.

Uncle Bill’s fork froze in midair. “It’s not an overstatement, Jason. This is real. You have a gift. Some call it a burden.” He waved his fork and its glazed carrot cargo at Jason. “It all depends how you use it.”

Jason chewed in silence. Maybe he’d seen a few signs of the powers they spoke of. What about that time in Alaska he’d wished his best friend Ned didn’t have leukemia, and the next day he tested free of the cancer? Or when his favorite teacher was about to leave class with a migraine, but Jason wished it gone and Mr. Lester sat back down and finished the lesson.

Jason leaned forward and leveled his brown eyes at Aunt Ruby. “Does this “power” have anything to do with curing people?”

Ruby shot a worried glance at her husband and turned to put the milk in the fridge.

“Yes.” Uncle Bill pushed his plate away. “That’s part of it.”

Jason’s heart pounded with joy. “Well then, I’ll cure Mom and then I can go back to Alaska to live with her again, right?”

Uncle Bill’s shoulders drooped. “Well, here’s where the burden part comes in. You can only cure someone who’s not a blood relative. When I said it’s stronger than blood, I meant blood connections mean nothing next to the powers you have at your—”

Jason's chair clattered to the floor behind him as he leaped up. "What kind of B.S. power is that? I can't even help my own mother?" His thigh pulled at the tablecloth as he pushed past, launching his plate and its half-eaten pork chop onto the linoleum.

"Wait!" His uncle called after Jason but made no move to follow. "There is one way you can get around the blood relative thing."

Ruby leaned close and gripped Bill's shoulder. "Are you sure you should tell him? He doesn't know his father died trying to relieve that burden, to change the gift so it could help anyone."

## CHAPTER NINE

### Judith Works

Jason stopped in his tracks. “What’s the way? What do I have to do to cure my Mom?”

Uncle Bill looked at Aunt Ruby “Should I tell?”

Ruby shook her head. “Too risky. I don’t want to see the little bugger die. Don’t care much for his mum anyway.”

Jason couldn’t hear her exact words, but saw her negative thoughts first bouncing around her brain before they came out of her mouth. He must have “special powers” like Uncle Bill said. But uncle didn’t know the extent. Nor did he. Time to try them out a little at a time.

Just then Rusty padded into the kitchen, his toe nails clicking on the worn linoleum floor. When he saw that no one was paying attention, he grabbed Bill’s half-eaten pork chop right off his plate and ran out the open back door to enjoy his meal under the porch swing.

“Damn dog!” Bill turned away from Ruby and Jason to follow the dog. Jason could feel that his uncle would try to recover the pork chop just to punish the dog. Jason, followed by Ruby, rushed to the porch to watch the contest and who would win.

“Owwwww.” Bill was looking at his right hand which had neat dents from canine teeth. But the dog couldn’t eat the chop and bite Bill at the same time, so he made the mistake of dropping the chop. Bill made a dive with his left hand to retrieve the meat. Rusty, knowing he’d lost this round, slunk off past the clothes hanger, which was whirling in the desert wind, turning the snapping sheets a sand-colored tint.

Jason thought how scratchy they’d be when he climbed in bed tonight. He put his special powers to work: the twin sheet for his bed turned white; those for the double bed absorbed the extra grit.

Bill triumphantly carried the slobbered-over chop to the garbage can under the sink. At least he had some power over the dog. But why did Jason inherit special powers from his father and

probably his grandfather, the old coot, and *he* was left out? Maybe Ruby could help him muddle his way toward an answer.

Jason went off to work on his model airplanes while Bill flopped in his worn Barcalounger. He flipped the switch for a massage. Ruby gave him the side-eye. He knew it was because of Rusty. She loved the dog. Probably more than she loved him if he thought about it honestly. He got up for a beer, popped the can open, and found the remote.

The program was some religious thing where a woman with loads of blond hair, blue eyeliner, and a ton of jewelry was raising her arms in hallelujah for all the donations that were pouring in from the toll-free number crawling across the screen. Maybe he should donate and then be rewarded with a fleet of fancy cars and a jet. But right now, what he really needed was a way to talk to Ruby.

“Ruby, Rubeee. Comm’ere darlin.”

Ruby came to perch on an arm of the still vibrating chair. “Turn that damn thing off will you. I can’t think.”

“Well, that makes two of us. Sorry about Rusty. I know you love him, but he ain’t got a right to snatch food. Anyway, we’ve got other fish to fry.”

That reminded Ruby she needed to get out the frozen catfish for tomorrow’s dinner. “So, you want to tell Jason about what his real special powers are? Not the dumb stuff he pulled over the laundry when he thought I wasn’t looking. I dunno about telling him more. Anyway, you know all about it, seen it in action and I’m only an onlooker. Shame about Jason’s dad. What do you really know?”

“Only that he tried to cure Emily but instead she got worse and he didn’t make it.”

“Maybe that’s just a coincidence. Maybe it’s contagious like some of the viruses going around.”

“Don’t think so. At least the doc said it was just one of those things that happen. Usually to good people.” He glanced at the TV, which was still on. “Maybe if we donated some money?”

“Remember, we don’t have any money and especially not for that blonde you’re eyeing. She’s not your type.” Ruby picked up the remote and hit the OFF button. The blonde disappeared as if Jason had willed her vanishing.

Bill sighed. He was sorry to see her go, but to be honest Ruby was more his type, just like she said. Plump and good on cold nights but bad in the hot summers. Maybe someday they could get a king bed for seasonal use. Maybe Jason could use his special powers. On the other hand, maybe there was a limited amount, like the frog pond in the back forty that went dry late spring and if Jason used it all up there for sure wouldn’t be any way to save his mother. But like he told the kid, it didn’t work with blood relatives. Or was that just an old wives tale, like something Ruby dreamed up?

Maybe he and Jason could find some way to test the theory, go up to Alaska to try.

“Jason. Hey, come on into the living room. I have an idea.” Bill turned on the massage function on his lounge again. It helped him think.

Jason didn’t appear. Bill repeated his call, adding, “I mean NOW!” There was no response.

Bill heaved himself out of the recliner. Ruby followed him into Jason’s bedroom. A newly-completed model airplane, a Spitfire, dangled on a piece of fishing line tied to a hook in the ceiling, but there was no sign of Jason.

They went out into the yard to see if he was playing with the dog. There was Rusty worrying the remains of the pork chop he’d managed to reclaim. No sign of Jason.

## CHAPTER TEN

Vanessa Arpin

Jason walked out onto the decrepit dock and took a deep breath. He found the pond as he willed it, dry as bones; withered like his mother's spirit. He didn't mean to make the frogs die, only to stop another tragedy. Papa said the cure was worse than the ailment. He rubbed the piece of white fur between his fingers then tossed it into the water hole. If only his "special powers" were the kind that mattered, he wouldn't be living with his Uncle Bill and Aunt Ruby. The only saving grace was Rusty. He would hate leaving a faithful dog behind. He wondered what it felt like to be normal, to not sense the words before they were spoken.

Just as the pond water grew, he felt them near. Up on the hill he saw them thrashing their arms like catfish out of water. Jason lowered his gaze to the still water, for a moment he could hear his mom calling him. Her hand reaching for him to pull her out.

"Jason get back here this instant! You're in a heap of trouble, we know you used your magic powers and now your Aunt Ruby and I got the hives!"

Ruby stood a few feet away, scratching, and joined the hollering. "And after all we done for you! You better come back here when your uncle calls your name." She hated encouraging her husband's temper, yet as she feared, Jason was becoming more like his mother.

Jason laughed—his plan worked. Maybe his special powers were useful after all. Maybe his uncle would think twice about hurting him now.

"I told you Bill, Jason needs some schooling. To think all this time, we thought he was building model airplanes up in his room he was probably scheming."

"I'm not afraid of that boy, he's my kin. Why, his own father couldn't have done better by him."

"I'm just saying maybe it's time we get him out of here, and you and I can have a normal life again, maybe get out sometime, go to town, maybe dance?"

Bill nodded, "It has been a while since we had some fun, that kid takes up all our time."

“And money,” Ruby added.

“Maybe we will find a cure for his mom and we can be rid of him once and for all,” Bill added.

“That’s crazy talk Bill. Jason’s father tried, too. We got to find another way out of this.”

“We will. I’m going to take Jason to Alaska and test out a theory. It’s something I should have done a long time ago,” then extended his hand to Ruby.

“I’m not going to be any part of this Bill. You better just get the boy,” she said, then retreated into the forest.

Jason glowed with pride—it was easier than he thought—he could pick them off one at a time. His uncle was no real threat.

Bill skirted down the steep hill, catching himself twice from tumbling. “Come back here Jason, don’t make me haul you back up this hill!”

Jason stood his ground, thinking hard about his mom. Maybe he was dangerous and like Ruby suggested, they were not real blood kin. He pulled another swatch of pelt from his pocket and wished. Just as his uncle was about to reach him, Rusty bolted out of the woods behind him, and pinned him to the ground.

Jason leaned in to pat Rusty’s head. “Good dog Rusty.”

Bill sat in silence staring at the canine teeth.

“He won’t bite you. Not unless I tell him to,” Jason boasted.

Bill dug his hands into the loose gravel.

“I wasn’t going to hurt you, Jason.”

“You hurt me enough already. I’m leaving, and you’re not going to stop me. I’m going find my mom and cure her.”

“Of course you will Jason, and I’m going to help you. Now call off the dog.” His voice trembled.

“I will when I’m good and ready,” Jason said, knowing it would be only a matter of time until his uncle would go back on his word. He reached out and grabbed Rusty by the collar, plummeting the two of them into the water.

Bill pulled himself off the ground and peered into the murky water. “Come back you fool!” Bill cried. He grabbed ahold of large stick and poked around.

“Bill what are you doing down there?”

Bill turned around to see where the voice was coming from.

“Ruby you better come down here. The boy’s done himself in and took the dog, too.”

“I told you I don’t want anything to do with this dark magic.”

Just as he turned around Bill felt a tap on his shoulder.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alison Ersfeld

Bill stood frozen by the water, the large stick hanging limp in his sweaty hand. He felt her haunting presence, as if she were there looking into his eyes. The forest and the expanding pond in front of him were muted, like a large piece of gauze stretched to cover everything. He hadn't meant for things to turn out so wrong with Jason; now she seemed poised to hear his justification. He shivered. She wasn't going to be pleased, and he knew what that meant.

Suddenly the spell broke and it was now Ruby next to him, enraged.

“What did I tell you about getting us involved in this darkness, you fool? You chose me, I remind you, and not yer kin when you married me.”

She was finished being accommodating about Jason and all this. It didn't matter to her if Bill became angry. It was time to act before the boy became too strong. Although Bill said he didn't fear him, *she* did. After all, she was standing here with angry red bumps on her skin that the boy had maliciously brought on. This was it. He had to go, and tomorrow would be too late.

And Bill's cockamamie idea to bring Jason north to Alaska was not the answer. It was too late to seek a cure there, and the boy would wear him out and she'd never see her husband alive again. Although she loved Bill, she was starting to regret marrying him and all his family baggage. It was true: you never just marry your partner, you marry their whole damned family, too. When she agreed to his sweet proposal, she knew nothing about the strange powers Jason and his mother possessed.

Bill looked from Ruby to the placid surface of the murky pond. No sign of Jason or that disloyal mutt, Rusty. He would have to put the dog down after that viciousness. It was as if Jason had made that beast attack him with his mind. Bill wasn't about to let the boy or that dog have the upper hand on his own turf.

He had taken Jason in hoping to do right by his “sister”, but now he could see that he'd been wrong to do it. Like his mother, Jason had become too strong in his powers and his willfulness.

When she disappeared, he thought that was the end of the troubles, but now he could see that

they were only just beginning.

“Jason,” he called. “Come back and let’s think about how we can find your mama. I got a lead on where to look. I know how to cure her now, too.”

“Bill, I told you to leave this alone,” Ruby barked.

Caught in the middle of two deranged women and an out of control boy, Bill thought to himself. What I’d really like is to walk far away from all of them and have a normal life again. Not only was the kid taking up too much of his time and energy, but so was Ruby and the pathless path he was following to find any trace of Jason’s mother. No choice now, though, except to follow this through and end it once and for all.

As Bill looked at the surface of the pond, Jason and Rusty emerged on the bank across the way. “Jason, stop right where you are,” Bill yelled across. “You cannot do this without me and I aim to help you.”

Jason pulled himself and Rusty out of the still rising water, stepping over the dead frogs lining the shore. He reached into his pocket for another swatch of pelt and wished.

“Come on, Rusty boy. We’re done with these two good-for-nothings. Good boy, there you go,” Jason cooed to his only friend as the dog shook himself dry.

The boy and the dog reached the line of straight pine trees above the water and Jason glanced at the pond. This time he was really free and there was no going back. Aunt Ruby and Uncle Bill were waist deep in the rising water, and he wouldn’t look back again. His mother needed him and he needed her.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Laura Moe

Jason flicked his wrist, creating a massive wave which enveloped his aunt and uncle. The wall of water muffled their screams as the river washed them away. Jason howled in laughter.

The dog barked loudly, but Jason gave his buddy a reassuring pat on the back. “Let’s go get a burger and fries. And I’ll get you an ice cream cone. How does that sound?”

Rusty gave a short bark. One of the dog’s favorite expressions was ice cream.

Jason chuckled, and the two headed east, deeper into the pines. He reached into his pocket and offered Rusty a treat. The dog gobbled at it happily. Jason whistled as they trekked through dense forest a mile up the hill, dead leaves and pine needles crunching beneath their feet. At the crest, the trees thinned out and the town loomed below them.

At this distance, bathed in bright sunshine, it looked like any quaint town you’d see in a Hallmark movie with its wide sidewalks and small shops, but as Jason and Rusty drew closer, the town’s quirks grew more apparent. The town itself was built on a platform that could be raised and lowered on command.

Jason stepped up his pace. His mother was there.

Before meeting with her, he honored his promise to Rusty by stopping at the café. Jason ordered a cheeseburger and fries and a strawberry shake for himself. Being a miscreant built up a healthy appetite. He also ordered a small vanilla cone for Rusty.

Rusty sat on his hind legs and begged when he saw the cone in Jason’s hand.

Jason bent toward his buddy. “Who’s a good boy?”

Rusty barked.

Jason ruffled through his fur. “Yes, you are.” He placed the ice cream cone in front of Rusty’s jaw, and the dog consumed it in one bite.

The kid at the counter handed Jason a white bag pocked with grease from the fries. “Thanks.” Jason flipped the kid a quarter as a tip and laughed like a hyena.

He and Rusty strolled up Main Street as Jason noshed on fries. He dropped one occasionally for Rusty to snarf up. When the fries were gone Jason pulled the burger out. He crumpled the bag and dumped it on the ground. As he ate the cheeseburger, he crushed the wrapper into a ball and tossed it in the street where it landed on the hood of a Porsche.

He cackled and walked on.

Rusty stopped and started to growl. The ground beneath them groaned and shifted. “We’re going under, buddy!”

Jason felt his insides shimmer and he rubbed his hands together. “Almost home.”

As the town lowered, the light changed from the blue of daylight into a russet colored glow and the temperature rose exponentially. When the town was fully submerged, the storefronts melded into the blood red walls. Steam rose from the floor forming a pink fog. Jason and Rusty stood and waited for the fog to clear, where a woman wearing a red cat suit waited.

She smiled a deadly smile filled with pointed, black teeth and snapped her tail in the air. She snaked her tail around Jason. “Welcome home, my son.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Diane Naab

Jason stood frozen despite the menacing heat that engulfed him and Rusty. This woman could not possibly be his mother. “Where am I?”

“You’re here with me in my world of pain and suffering. How do you like it?”

“I don’t. I don’t like it at all. I’ve come to save you. To cure you.”

“Not possible. No one can save me now. This is the beginning of the end for me. This is where I belong.”

Jason reached in his pocket for a piece of fur. Nothing. He tried his jacket. Nothing. He knew the fur was important to perform his magic. *Now what?*

“I need to tell you my story Jason, then you must go. Return to Alaska where you will be safe and away from Bill and Ruby.”

Staring at his mom, he saw her frightening demeanor and obvious decline into evil. Is this happening to me as well? Mean and hateful towards Bill and Ruby. Dissing the kid at the diner, throwing garbage in the streets. Evil thoughts.

“I don’t understand any of this. And Bill and Ruby. He was kind until Ruby turned him against me. I knew I needed to get away. To find you. To help you. Bill said I have special powers.”

His mom sat down with her face in her hands. “Jason. Ruby and I are sisters. No one knows. We only learned of it a couple of years ago. She is cursed. She has demonic powers and that’s how I became sick. Her spells put me in this place. It’s the end for me.”

“No! I won’t let that happen. Please have faith in me. I will cure you and take you with me to Alaska. We can have a safe home and life. You can meet the girl I love. Her name is Roberta. Please let me help you.”

Jason wasn't sure what to do next. No fur pieces left and not completely sure of his powers, he simply sat down beside his mother. Took her hands and began to hum a song Roberta had taught him. It calmed them both. Rusty joined them, sitting at their feet.

“Thank you for being here Jason. I've missed you so much.”

Jason continued to hum, stroking his mom's hands. He glanced down at Rusty and saw something on his collar. A small piece of fur. He grabbed the tuft and began chanting words he didn't understand. Eyes closed, he felt like he was floating. When he opened his eyes, his mom was floating alongside of him, smiling, beautiful. The pits of fire were far below them now as they drifted upward, landing by a stream in a forest.

“What just happened?”

“I'm not sure but apparently I do have special powers. One last leg of this trip and we're home. You ready?”

“Absolutely!”

## EPILOGUE

Diane Naab

Thomas fumbled with his keys and opened the door to the apartment. Grocery bags spilled over with fresh fruit and vegetables, two Alaskan salmon filets, and a bottle of Chardonnay. Jason was sitting at the kitchen table looking like he had just landed after a twelve-hour flight with screaming babies.

“Geez. You look like hell. Rough night?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I didn’t sleep well. You won’t believe the dream I had. Crazy. My uncle Bill was in it. A woman, Ruby. His wife, I think. A dog named Rusty. Hellfire and brimstone. Scary stuff. And my mom. She was really sick and, well, looked like a devil. Tail and all.” Jason shook his head trying to piece together the images which made absolutely no sense.

“Hey, speaking of your mom. She called. She said to tell you she’s over whatever bug she had. Wants to come for a visit. Also, Sally is pissed you missed Karaoke last night. Where did you go man?”

“I visited my Uncle Bill and then...I don’t know. I don’t remember much after that. I’m just glad I’m not living the dream I had last night.”

Jason got up and made an espresso and popped a waffle in the toaster.

“Hey, Thomas. What do you think about taking a trip to Alaska? I’ve always wanted to go. Wintertime. You know, watch the dog sleds taking off in the Iditarod.”

Jason smiled as an image came to mind of a native girl dressed in a blue Kuspuk dress and sealskin mukluks. A beautiful smiling face peeking from her fur trimmed parka.