

Chapter 1

Nothing Is by Accident

I.

Ugh! How does Mrs. Grain expect me to write an essay on dreams when I've never had a single dream my whole life? Or if I did, I can't seem to remember what I dreamt about.

Why are they so important anyway? Everyone in my class dreams of being famous or making lots of money after they graduate. In reality, dreams never amount to anything. Besides, I already know what I'm going to do with my future. I'll finish my senior year in high school, move away to college to get a science degree, and then become a research technician making enough money to live on. After that who cares what happens.

Dillon Chase dropped his chin onto his hands as he stared out of the dusty, sun-burnt window of his bedroom at the Joshua tree in the middle of the yard. His biology teacher, Mr. Dunn, had once explained to his class that a Joshua tree really was not a tree, but rather a member of the lily family. At that time Dillon had thought it was another boring trivia fact that Mr. Dunn always seemed to get sidetracked on, but today he was so fascinated with the fact that he could not get it out of his mind.

Why a lily in the middle of the desert? That seems kind of ironic since lilies grow in water. Why does it have to look so ugly? Why do the flowers smell so nasty? Why...did I wait to write my paper until I woke up for school today? Oh well, my score in the class is high enough that I'll still ace the class.

Dillon flung his backpack over his left shoulder, opened the garage door and skateboarded out onto the sidewalk. He paid little attention to the

four-foot, yellow-green lizard taking a squat in his neighbor's yard. He had seen that same lizard enough over the last week to assume that someone on the block was feeding it. As long as it wasn't crapping in his yard then life was okay.

Dillon's thoughts hung up on deeper reflections as he skateboarded across the road. His senior year was almost over and in no time at all he would be moving away to college. Having a semi-photographic memory had allowed him to cruise through school, especially in his science and math classes. However, English and writing classes always required additional effort, as he had to think rather than just regurgitate information. He figured that college was going to be more of the latter, as he could shy away from the more challenging liberal arts classes.

In spite of having no real challenges, Dillon almost always worked hard on his classes during the weekdays so he could delve into the role-playing gamer's world during the weekends. Such a lifestyle often made one a target for bored miscreants. However, he hadn't been picked on since last year, and usually only had a run-in once a year anyway. That was when he had to show another school bully that having a dad as a martial arts grandmaster had its advantages. Dillon rarely took it seriously, but he had trained as much as necessary to get his black belt at the age of sixteen. He was enough of a nerd so that when he brought home a three-day suspension note for fighting one of his annual bullies, he could tell his dad was actually a little proud, and his Mom would only ground him for a few days to let him know that he shouldn't make fighting a habit.

After school, and with only a slight berating by Mrs. Grain for his missing assignment, Dillon sat on the sidewalk outside a run-down science trailer waiting for his friends. All of them loved role-playing games as much as he did, so most of their after-school conversations focused on the upcoming weekend's gaming marathon.

Lian* was the first to trot up to their usual gathering spot. If a name determined a person's fate, then Lian had a long way to go to fit into his Chinese name, which meant graceful willow. He was tall, gangly, and required intense effort just to avoid tripping, bumping, or running into something whenever he moved. Lian was president of both the chess and computer clubs, two things that always seemed to go hand-in-hand. It also made sense that he chose to be the wizard, a position of scholarly intelligence, when they played any sort of fantasy game.

Dillon knew that Lian used the weekend gaming to get away from the daily ridicule that followed wherever he went. But he had learned long ago not to intervene when he saw Lian in a bad situation, since it only intensified the struggle with a darker component of his psyche. A couple

years ago Dillon had heard that some kids were waiting after school to have some fun with Lian. Dillon got there just in time to stop a beating from turning into a hospital visit. Later that night he stopped by Lian's house unannounced to see how he was doing. Upon barging into Lian's room he caught a glimpse of a handgun's metallic butt underneath a bed pillow.

A normal kid might have frozen in place or pretended not to notice the gun, but Dillon slammed the door, walked right past a startled Lian, grabbed the gun and pointed it at the pillow. Without time to think, he pulled the trigger and tried not to flinch from the explosion that shook the room and rattled the open window. Then he dropped the gun and jumped out the open window just as the bedroom door's frame splintered from the sudden impact of Lian's dad. Dillon could still hear the former drill instructor's voice booming halfway down the street as well as the shrill Chinese words of Lian's mom.

The next day at school Lian was the first to meet up with Dillon at their sitting spot. His only word to Dillon before the others arrived was "Thanks"—a single word that conveyed a new, unbreakable loyalty and friendship.

Dillon just smiled and tried to cover up his hands, which had been shaking ever since they touched the gun. Now he wondered, as he often did, if things would have been better if he hadn't stopped the after-school beating.

"Hey Dillon, you ready for another weekend of the sorcerer reigning supreme?" asked Lian.

"How did you know I was bringing around another sorcerer to kick your butt?" Dillon snapped back.

"Well, you can always win if you want since you're the game master. However, I know that my mage* would win outright in any fair fight."

"Yeah, of course any fight I'd win you would immediately scream that it wasn't fair. Just rest assured that during your mage's last breath he will stand awestruck from the shock and horror of what's happening to him, while your own jaw will drop so fast that your skin will have to hurry to catch up," replied Dillon with a big grin.

Just then Matt and Tanya rounded the building and headed toward the two. At five-foot-nine Matt had been the tallest kid on the junior high playground and had taken on the title of school bully, mostly because others expected him to. By the tenth grade a number of kids had surpassed his unchanging frame, and Matt decided then that it was time to lie low and take on a new role. He'd studied hard and had earned a science

scholarship to Hope College, a small private school in Michigan, where he planned to study biology next year. The heavy science focus did drain him, so when the gaming weekend came around he liked to be the berserking warrior who fought more than thought.

Tanya, dwarfing Matt by nearly four inches, had the usual cocky smile of any high school athlete who was top in the state. She was a good volleyball competitor and a great basketball player who did nothing to let others know she cared about her feminine side. She swore with the best of them, never wore make-up, and often stunk of body odor from an early morning pick-up game of street ball. However, on the weekends she came to their gatherings in a dress willing to play any type of character.

Although Tanya had been playing on weekends with them for almost two years, they still knew very little about her and her family life. Dillon could ascertain that her mom and dad both commuted down the 14 freeway to Los Angeles. This meant they were gone for around thirteen hours every day, usually including Saturday and Sunday. Her home life appeared pretty normal apart from the fact that her parents were never around. Tanya seemed to like that just fine, and always made comments about how she enjoyed being able to do whatever she wanted.

“Hey love birds, how’s it going?” asked Dillon with a cheesy grin. He ducked as Matt’s backpack flew by his face. No one could picture Tanya and Matt dating, which made the needling all the more fun.

“Stuff it nerd,” Tanya coolly replied as she dribbled her L.A. Sparks basketball, which matched the purple and gold jersey that was tucked into her shorts. “So I know it’s two days away, but what are you setting up for the weekend at your house? Futuristic, fantasy, superheroes, classic sleuth?”

“Lian already guessed it. I’ve got to go with fantasy this weekend,” Dillon replied. “You guys are almost done with your quest and Gabe is close to figuring out what his magical elfin boots do.”

Of course, Dillon thought, Gabe won’t want the boots once he figures out their power. They cause leprosy and won’t come off one’s feet. The group will have to take a detour from their quest and find the healing temple of Sanatio before Gabe’s health gives out.

Gabe, headphones in his ears and MP3 player in-hand, was the last one to round the corner. He sauntered toward the group, nearly lost in his music. Gabe was originally from a rough neighborhood in Whittier, California. He had just joined the gang scene when his mom uprooted him and moved their whole family to Lancaster, California. Although gang violence had risen sharply in the Antelope Valley* over the years, Gabe didn’t pick up where he had left off. Secretly desperate for the opportunity

to get out, he had turned his life around and now enjoyed music and literature, especially the classics. He also liked to train with Dillon's dad to keep in shape. In fact, he trained harder and more often than Dillon.

Gabe pulled down his headphones, which were blasting some lesser-known piano symphony. "Hi Dillon, Tanya, Matt, Lian. Boy that was a lousy day. I messed up on that chemistry quiz. I mean, why on Earth do I need to calculate the heat of formation for creating water from hydrogen and oxygen? That is almost as useless as integral functions." Gabe hated the hard sciences, but his version of messing up meant he would pull off an A- or B+ on the quiz. He had the highest grades out of all of them, but Dillon always joked with him about taking the "soft" sciences and other "artsy" classes.

The conversation drifted between school and role-playing games for nearly a half hour. Dillon then got up, said some whimsical goodbyes, and headed home on his skateboard to do his chores before dinner.

II.

The way back home from school should have been uneventful as always, but Dillon was yet again caught-up reflecting on a normal object in his path.

Who determined that a light pole should be so high? Who figured out the optimal distance between two light poles? Why is that huge lizard leaking on the light pole? Wait, that lizard doesn't belong...

The sound of the impact made far less noise than the screeching tires coming from the 1998 Honda Accord. Dillon's body hurtled through the air like a rag doll before coming to a sudden bone-crunching stop against the cement curb. His skateboard shattered on impact, launching the larger pieces over a brick wall and into a backyard some fifty feet away. For a moment both the body and the car lay motionless. Then the Accord's driver-side door slowly opened and out slid a tall, lithe man who cautiously made his way to the near-lifeless body.

Damn, this is not going to look good on my record. The man scanned the area, as if searching for something. Strange that it could even happen. Maybe my vehicle needs a tune-up?

The driver methodically lifted the boy's unconscious body out of the pooling blood and calmly placed it in the rear seat of his car. He nestled back into his own seat and shifted the car into gear. It nudged smoothly into the busy intersection and merged between the other cars before dissolving without a trace.

In spite of the after work traffic, there was no indication that anyone noticed what had transpired—except for the four-foot lizard propped up nearly human-like against a freshly painted yellow fire hydrant. An unsettling grin lined its face.

III.

“How could you be so careless, Sandy? You know we checked out your vehicle and the avoidance meter was full? Did you forget to turn it on? Balsha!* This is going to affect your record.”

Even though his jacket was covered in splotches of dried blood, Sandy just stood there and carefully processed what he was going to say before he spoke. “I had it on, Jake. There was an anomaly in the area.”

“An anomaly? Are you sure about that? Of course you’re sure. Well, it’s just like them to think it’s funny to have a kid from Earth get splattered by one of our Observers. Throw the body in the stasis chamber. We’ll have to spend all night creating a body-drop scenario that has the highest probability of being accepted back on Earth. Balsha! Why do the bad things always have to happen on my watch?”

“He’s not dead yet, but I don’t understand why.” Sandy’s voice had an unusual amount of uncertainty.

“Not dead? My readout shows his neck is snapped and his legs are crushed. He’s also lost half his blood, and his lungs and ribs have merged into one gelatinous mass. How can he be alive? Why is he alive?” Jake reread the scrolling signs on the palm of his hand, shrugged his shoulders and looked back at Sandy. “Well, take him to the medic room and let me know when he dies. I hope it’s not too long since I’d really like to get home sometime this week.”

“We have all been trying to get home for a long time, Jake. One more night here or in your room is not going to matter either way.” Sandy’s face was drawn and still showed no emotion.

“Nice, Sandy. I don’t need a smart-aleck right now.” Jake finally processed what Sandy meant and stopped talking for a second to think. “If he lives, it might mean something more. It might mean we do go home soon.” He threw a grimace toward Sandy and walked away.

Sandy just stared after Jake for about a minute before he let out the slow, deep breath he had been holding. He returned to his vehicle and extricated the boy’s body from the rear seat, taking time to cross Dillon’s hands on his stomach before lifting him. He turned and proceeded down a long and narrow, bright green corridor with a number of open doorways staggered on each side. Stopping halfway, Sandy looked through the

doorway to the right that contained the stasis chambers. He then turned in the opposite direction and walked into a large, sterile room spanned by over forty metallic beds and stared at the disinterested inhabitant. The doctor only nodded his head in the direction of one of the med-cubicles against the far wall that was reserved for the most serious injuries.

Sandy stepped into the eight-foot-wide, square cubicle and carefully laid the body on the unusually pliable metal table. Immediately, the opposite wall lit up with an incomprehensible display of scrolling characters. Not long thereafter gleaming tentacles, with an assortment of attached tools, formed out of the table and worked their way over, on, and finally into Dillon's body.

Sandy gave one last look at the body, which didn't seem nearly as massacred as he first thought, before he sighed and walked out of the room. The room sensed his leaving and silently slid the door shut as he exited. He ambled back to his vehicle and opened the rear door again, surprised to see that there was less blood on the tan, leather upholstery than he had expected. He reached under the passenger seat and pulled out his Caol Ila bottle of scotch before leaving the observatory.