

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE



THE
PALADIN
PROPHECY

MARK FROST

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About the Book

Will West is careful to live life under the radar. At his parents' insistence, he's made sure to get mediocre grades and to stay in the middle of the pack on his cross-country team. Then Will slips up, accidentally scoring off the charts on a nationwide exam, and he is recruited by an exclusive and mysterious prep school - the best school no one's ever heard of, with technology the likes of which no one's ever seen.

At the same time, coincidentally - or not so - Will realizes he's being followed by men in dark hats, driving black sedans who pose a terrifying threat to his family. What follows is a series of events and revelations that places Will smack in the middle of a millennia old struggle between titanic forces . . .



BOOK I

MARK FROST

RHCP DIGITAL

FOR THE LOST AND LONELY ONES . . .

Every crime is punished,
Every virtue rewarded,
Every wrong redressed,
In silence and certainty.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

I couldn't see his face.

He was running along a mountain trail. Running desperately. Pursued by black grasping shadows that were little more than holes in the air, but there was no mistaking their intention. The boy was in unspeakable danger and he needed my help.

I opened my eyes.

Curtains fluttered at the dark window. Freezing air whispered through a crack in the frame, but I was drenched in sweat, my heart pounding.

Just a dream? No. I had no idea who this boy was. He appeared to be about my age. But I knew this much with iron certainty:

He was real, and he was headed my way.

JUST ANOTHER TUESDAY

THE IMPORTANCE OF an Orderly Mind

Will West began each day with that thought even before he opened his eyes. When he did open them, the same words greeted him on a banner across his bedroom wall:

#1: THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ORDERLY MIND.

In capital letters a foot high. Rule #1 on Dad's List of Rules to Live By. That's how crucial his father considered this piece of advice. Remembering it was one thing. *Following* Rule #1, with a mind as hot-wired as Will's, wasn't nearly as easy. But wasn't that why Dad had put it on top of his list, and on Will's wall, in the first place?

Will rolled out of bed and stretched. Flicked on his iPhone: 7:01. He punched up the calendar and scanned his schedule. Tuesday, November 7:

- Morning roadwork with the cross-country team
- Day forty-seven of sophomore year
- Afternoon roadwork with the cross-country team

Nice. Two runs sandwiching seven hours of Novocain for the brain. Will took a greedy breath and scratched his fingers vigorously through his unruly bed head. Tuesday, November 7, shaped up as a vanilla, cookie-cutter day. Not one major stress clouding the horizon.

So why do I feel like I'm about to face a firing squad?

He triple-racked his brain but couldn't find a reason. As he threw on his sweats, the room lit up with a bright, cheerful sunrise. Southern California's most tangible asset: the best weather in the world. Will opened the curtains and looked out at the Topa Topa Mountains rising beyond the backyard.

Wow. The mountains were cloaked with snow from the early winter storm that had blown through the night before. Backlit by the early-morning sun, they were sharper and cleaner than high-def. He heard familiar birdsong and saw the little white-breasted blackbird touch down on a branch outside his window. Tilting its head, curious and fearless, it peered in at him as it had every morning for the last few days. Even the birds were feeling it.

So I'm fine. It's all good.

But if that was how he *really* felt, then what had stirred up this queasy cocktail of impending doom? The hangover from a forgotten nightmare?

An unruly thought elbowed its way into his mind: *This storm brought more than snow.*

What? No idea what that meant—wait, had he dreamt about snow? Something about running? The silvery dream fragment faded before Will could grab it.

Whatever. Enough of this noise. Time to stonewall this funk-u-phoria. Will drove through the rest of his morning routine and skipped downstairs.

Mom was in the kitchen working on her second coffee. With reading glasses on a lanyard around her thick black hair, she was tapping her phone, organizing her day.

Will grabbed a power shake from the fridge. "Our bird's back," he said.

"Hmm. People-watching again," she said. She put down her phone and wrapped her arms around him. Mom never passed up a good hug. One of those committed huggers for whom, in the moment, nothing else mattered. Not even Will's mortification when she clinch-locked him in public.

“Busy day?” he asked.

“Crazy. Like stupid crazy. You?”

“The usual. Have a good one. Later, Moms.”

“Later, Will-bear. Love you.” She jangled her silver bracelets and got back to her phone as Will headed for the door. “Always and forever.”

“Love you, too.”

Later, and not much later, how he would wish that he’d stopped, gone back, held on to her, and never let go.

Will reached the base of their front steps and shook out his legs. Sucked in that first bracing hit of clean, cold morning air and exhaled a frosty billow, ready to run. It was his favorite part of the day . . . and then that droopy dreadful gloom crept all over him again.

#17: START EACH DAY BY SAYING IT’S GOOD TO BE ALIVE. EVEN IF YOU DON’T FEEL IT, SAYING IT—OUT LOUD—MAKES IT MORE LIKELY THAT YOU WILL.

“Good to be alive,” he said, without much conviction.

Damn. Right now #17 felt like the lamest rule on Dad’s list. He could blame some obvious physical gripes. It was forty-eight degrees and damp. His muscles creaked from yesterday’s weight training. A night of slippery dreams had left him short on sleep. *I’m just out of whack. That’s all. I always feel better once I hit the road.*

#18: IF #17 DOESN’T WORK, COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS.

Will hit the stopwatch app on his phone and sprang into a trot. His Asics Hypers lightly slapped the pavement . . . 1.4 miles to the coffee shop: target time, seven minutes.

He gave #18 a try.

Starting with Mom and Dad. All the kids he knew ripped their parents 24/7, but Will never piled on. For good reason: Will West had won the parent lottery. They were smart, fair, and honest, not like the phonies who preached values, then slumped like delinquents when their kids weren't around. They cared about his feelings, always considered his point of view, but never rolled over when he tested the limits. Their rules were clear and balanced between lenient and protective, leaving him enough space to push for independence while always feeling safe.

Yeah, they have their strong points.

On the other hand: They were odd and secretive and perpetually broke and moved around like Bedouins every eighteen months. Which made it impossible for him to make friends or feel connected to any place they ever lived. But, hey, what do you need a peer group for when your parents are your only friends? So what if that messed him up massively for the rest of his life? He might get over it, someday. After decades of therapy and a barge full of antidepressants.

There. Blessings counted. Always works like a charm, thought Will dryly.

Will had shaken off the morning chill by the end of the second block. Blood pumping, his endorphins perked up his nervous system as the Valley stirred to life around him. He quieted his mind and opened his senses, the way his parents had taught him. Took in the smoky tang of wild sage and the oxygen-rich air of the orchards lining the East End roads, wet and shiny from the rain. A dog barked; a car started. Miles to the west, through the gap in the hills, he glimpsed a cobalt-blue strip of the Pacific catching the first beams of sunrise.

Good to be alive. He could almost believe it now.

Will cruised toward town, down lanes of rambling ranch houses, grouped closer together as he moved along. After only five months here, he liked Ojai more than anywhere

they'd ever lived. The small-town atmosphere and country lifestyle felt comfortable and easy, a refuge from the hassles of big-city life. The town was nestled in a high, lush valley sheltered by coastal mountains, with narrow passes the only way in on either end. The original inhabitants, the Chumash people, had named it Ojai: the Valley of the Moon. After hundreds of years of calling Ojai home, the Chumash had been driven out by "civilization" in less than a decade. Tell the Chumash about "refuge."

Will knew that his family would move on from this nearly perfect place, too. They always did. As much as he liked the Ojai Valley, he'd learned the hard way not to get attached to places or people—

A black sedan glided across the intersection a block ahead. Tinted glass on the side windows. He couldn't see the driver.

They're looking for an address they can't find, Will thought. Then he wondered how he knew that.

A faint marimba ring sounded. He slipped the phone from his pocket and saw Dad's first text of the day: HOW'S YOUR TIME?

Will smiled. Dad with his Caps Lock on again. Will had tried to explain texting etiquette to him about fifty times: "It's like you're SHOUTING!"

"But I am shouting," Dad had said. "I'M WAY OVER HERE!"

Will texted back: how's the conference? how's San Fran? He could text while running. He could text while riding down a circular staircase on a unicycle—

Will pulled up short even before he heard the rasp of rubber on wet pavement. A dark mass slid into his peripheral vision.

The black sedan. Shrouded by exhaust, throttle rumbling in idle, dead ahead of him. A late-model four-door, some plain domestic brand he didn't recognize. Odd: no logos, trim, or identifying marks. Anywhere. A front license plate

—generic, not California issue—with a small US flag tucked in one corner. But that was no civil service car pool engine under the hood. It sounded like a hillbilly NASCAR rocket.

He couldn't see anyone behind the black glass—and remembered: tinting windshields this dark was illegal—but he knew someone inside was looking at him. Will's focus narrowed, sounds faded. Time stopped.

Then a marimba broke the silence. Another text from Dad: RUN, WILL.

Without looking up, Will slipped his hoodie over his head and waved a faint apology at the windshield. He held up the phone, shaking it slightly as if to say, *My bad. Clueless teenager here.*

Will thumbed on the camera and casually snapped a picture of the back of the sedan. He slipped the phone into his pocket and eased back into his stride.

Make it look like you're just running, not running away, Will thought. *And don't look back.*

He trotted on, listening for the throaty engine. The car tached up and peeled off behind him, turning left and heading away.

Then Will heard someone say, "Fits the description. Possible visual contact."

Okay, how did *that* voice get in his head? And whose voice was it?

The driver, came the answer. *He's talking on a radio. He's talking about you.*

Will's heart thumped hard. With his conditioning, he had a resting pulse of fifty-two. It never hit triple digits until he was into his second mile. Right now it was north of a hundred.

First question: *Did Dad just tell me to RUN (from San Francisco?!) because he wants me to stay on pace for my target time, or because somehow he knows that car is bad news—*

Then he heard the sedan a block away, stomping through its gearbox, accelerating rapidly. Tires screamed: They were coming back.

Will cut into an unpaved alley. Behind him the sedan burst back onto the street he'd just left. Before the car reached the alley, Will veered right, hopped a fence, and jammed through a backyard littered with the wreckage of Halloween decorations. He vaulted over a chain-link fence into a narrow concrete run along the side of the house—

—and then, *damn*, a vicious blunt head burst out of a dog door to his right; a square snarling muzzle shot after him. He leaped onto the gate at the end of the run and scrambled over, just as the beast hurled its body into the fence, jaws snapping.

Half a block away, he heard the twin-hemi yowl as the car raced to the next corner. Will paused at the edge of the yard behind a towering hedge and gulped in air. He peeked around the hedge—all clear—then sprinted across the street, over a lawn, and past another house. A wooden fence bounded the rear yard, six feet high. He altered his steps to time his jump, grabbed the top, and leaped over, landing lightly in another alley—three feet from a weary young woman juggling a briefcase, a coffee flask, and her keys near a Volvo. She jolted as if she'd just been Tasered. Her flask hit the ground and rolled, leaking latte.

"Sorry," said Will.

He crossed the alley and raced through two more yards, the sedan rumbling somewhere nearby all the while. He stopped at the next side street and leaned back against a garage. As his adrenaline powered down, he felt faintly ridiculous. Thoughts and instincts argued in his head, tumbling like sneakers in an empty dryer:

You're perfectly safe. NO, YOU'RE IN DANGER. *It's just a random car.* YOU HEARD WHAT THEY SAID. PAY ATTENTION, FOOL!

Another text from Dad hit the screen: DON'T STOP, WILL.

Will motored down open streets through the outskirts of the business district. The team should be waiting at the diner by now. He'd duck inside and call Dad so he could hear his voice. But he realized he could hear it RIGHT NOW. Reminding him of a rule that Dad repeated like a fire drill:

#23: WHEN THERE'S TROUBLE, THINK FAST AND ACT DECISIVELY.

Will pulled up behind a church and peeked around. Two blocks away he saw the team, six guys in sweats outside the diner, RANGERS stitched across their backs. They were gathered around something at the curb he couldn't see.

He checked the time, and his jaw dropped. No way that could be right: He'd just covered the 1.4 miles from home, steeplechasing through backyards and fences . . . *in five minutes?*

Behind him, the snarling engine roared to life. He turned and saw the black car charging straight at him down the alley. Will broke for the diner. The sedan cornered hard behind him, swung around, and skidded to a halt.

Will was already two blocks away. He flipped up his hood, stuck his hands in his sweatshirt, and casually jogged up to the team.

"Whaddup," he mumbled, trying to keep panic out of his voice.

The team mostly ignored him, as usual. He blended in, keeping his back to the street. They parted enough for him to see what they were looking at.

"Check it out, dude," said Rick Schaeffer.

A badass tricked-out hot rod sat at the curb. It was like nothing Will had ever seen before, a matte black Prowler slung long and low on a custom chassis, with a slanted

front grille and wheels gleaming with chrome. Bumpers jammed out in front like Popeye's forearms. The manifolds of a monster V-8 burst out of the hood, oozing latent power. Baroque, steam-punk lines, crafted with sharp, finely etched venting, lined the body. The car looked both vintage and pristine, weirdly ageless, as if there were countless miles on this clean machine. A stranger's ride for sure: No local could have kept these hellacious wheels under wraps. It might have come from anywhere. It might have come from the nineteenth century by way of the future.

Will felt eyes find him from behind the diner window. They landed hard, like somebody poking him in the chest with two stiff fingers. He looked up but couldn't see inside; the sun had just crested the hills behind him, glaring off the glass.

"Don't touch my ride."

Will heard the voice in his head and knew it came from whoever was watching. Low, gravelly, spiked with a sharp accent, bristling with menace.

"Don't touch it!" snapped Will.

Startled, Schaeffer jerked his hand away.

The bald man driving the sedan didn't see the Prowler until the kids shifted away. He thought he might be hallucinating. He clicked the necro-wave filter onto the lens of their onboard scanner. The pictures of the family on-screen—father, mother, teenage boy—shrank to thumbnails. He focused on the hot rod until it filled the screen, pulsating with blinding white light.

No doubt about it: This was a Wayfarer's "flier." The first field sighting in decades.

Hands shaking, the bald man lifted his wrist mic and tabbed in. He tried to contain his excitement as he described what they'd found. Contact immediately approved a revised action.

No one had ever tagged a Wayfarer. It was a historic opportunity. The boy could wait.

The bald man ejected a black carbon-fiber canister the size of a large thermos from the nitrogen chamber. His partner picked it up and eased his window down. He raised the canister, chambered the Ride Along into the tracker bug's payload slot, then broke the vacuum seal. The open window helped dissipate the sulfurous smell as he prepared to fire, but it couldn't eliminate it.

Nothing could.

Will watched the black sedan ease forward, drawing even with them. He chanced a sidelong glance as it slid past. He saw a man holding a black canister up to the passenger window. Something skipped out of the canister, bounced onto the pavement, and came to rest. A wad of gum?

Will waited until the sedan moved out of sight. He reached for his phone, ready to fire off an urgent text to Dad. Then the coffee shop door swung open. A massive pair of buckled, battered black military boots etched with faded licks of flame stepped into view below the door.

That settles that. I don't want any part of this guy, either. Will took off toward school in an all-out breakaway. Barking about his head start, the rest of the team scrambled after him as Will turned the corner.

Behind them, the "wad of gum" in the street flipped over and sprouted twelve spidery legs supporting a needle-shaped head and liver-colored trunk. It skittered to the curb, sprang into the air, and attached to the Prowler's left rear fender with an elastic *thwap*, just as the engine rumbled to life.

As the hot rod drove off, the tracker bug crawled up and around the fender, then snickered forward along the Prowler's side, heading toward the driver. Before he reached the corner, the driver extended his left arm to signal a turn. The bug sprouted an inch-long spike from its

snout and launched into the air toward the back of the driver's neck, ready to deliver its invisible payload.

The driver swung the Prowler around in a controlled skid, and what looked like a small derringer appeared in his left hand. He tracked the airborne bug into his sights and pulled the trigger, and a silent beam of white light pulsed from the barrel. The tracker bug—and the invisible Ride Along it carried—puckered, fried, and dropped to the ground, a burnt black cinder on the road.

The derringer disappeared back up the driver's sleeve as he completed his turn—a full, smooth 360-degree spin—and kept going.

DR. ROBBINS

ANXIETY GNAWED AT Will like termites as he ran. He never let up, glancing over his shoulder only once. No black car, no Prowler, no more texts from Dad. And no other runners: Will arrived at school alone. He hit his stopwatch and was shocked to see that he'd covered the 1.2 miles from the diner to school in 3:47.

His best times shattered, twice, in less than an hour, and he'd hardly broken a sweat. He'd always known he was fast. He'd found out he could run like a deer at ten, when a dog chased him and he discovered he had another gear. But when he told his parents about it, they'd been dead-set against letting anyone see him run. They wouldn't even let him try out for cross-country until this year, and only after he promised to hold back in practice and meets. Will still didn't know how fast he really was, but based on this morning, he could have crushed every record in sight.

Will was already halfway dressed for class when the Rangers staggered into the locker room almost two minutes later. Gasping, a few threw strange looks his way.

"What the hell, West," whispered Schaeffer.

"Sorry," mumbled Will. "Don't know what got into me."

Will hurried out before anyone could ask more questions. If nobody else on the team had kept time, maybe by this afternoon they'd forget how fast he'd run. He would hang back in practice, in line with his mediocre standards, and they wouldn't give the torching he'd just laid down another thought.

But he still couldn't explain it to himself.

Will hustled through the halls and slipped into his seat a minute before the start of history class. He checked his messages one last time. Nothing. Dad had either gone into a breakfast meeting or headed out for his morning run.

Will switched the ringer to vibrate as the bell sounded. Classmates trudged in looking cranky and sleep deprived, fumbling with their phones as they digitally wrangled their frantic social lives. No one paid any attention to him. They never did. Will made sure of that. The perpetual “new kid,” Will had long ago learned how to cork his emotions deep inside, showing nothing but a bland mask to his peers.

#46: IF STRANGERS KNOW WHAT YOU'RE FEELING, YOU GIVE THEM THE ADVANTAGE.

Will was the tall rangy kid who always sat near the back, slumping to minimize his height, never making waves. The way he dressed, the way he spoke, the way he moved through life: quiet, contained, invisible. Exactly the way his parents had taught him.

#3: DON'T DRAW ATTENTION TO YOURSELF.

But a pounding bass line of worry still pulsed in his chest: RUN, WILL. DON'T STOP. Could the timing of Dad's texts—at the moment the black car spotted him—be a coincidence?

#27: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS COINCIDENCE.

Mrs. Filopovich launched into her daily drone. Today's subject: the Napoleonic Wars. The annoying buzz that leaked from the intercom on the wall above her desk sounded more interesting. Half the class struggled to stay conscious; he saw two wake-up jolts as chins slipped off

propped-up hands. The air in the room curdled, like even the oxygen had given up hope.

Will's mind drifted to the last thing Dad had said before leaving two days ago: "*Pay attention to your dreams.*" Suddenly he flashed onto the dream that had eluded him earlier. He closed his eyes to reel it back in and caught a single, fleeting image:

Snow falling. Stillness in an immense forest, large trees laden white.

For all their moving around, he'd never once seen snow in real life until that frosting on the mountains this morning. But this felt more real than a dream. Like a place he'd actually been before.

The door opened. The school psychologist slipped in, making an exaggerated effort to not be noticed, like a mime overacting a burglary. Will knew the man vaguely. He'd conducted Will's new-student orientation tour three months ago, in August. Mr. Rasche. Midthirties. Pear-shaped in corduroy and loud plaid, a prickly academic's beard fringing a cascade of chins.

Rasche whispered to Mrs. Filopovich. The class stirred to life, grateful for anything that spared them from Death by Bonaparte. The adults scanned the class.

Mr. Rasche's eyes settled on Will. "Will West?" he asked with a weird lopsided smile. "Would you come with me, please?"

Alarms tripped through Will's nervous system. He stood up, wishing he could disappear, as a gossipy ripple of intrigue ran through the class.

"Bring your things," said Mr. Rasche, as bland as milk.

Rasche waited at the door and then led the way, springing up on his toes with every step.

"What kind of trouble is this?" asked Will.

"Trouble? Oh, no, no, no," said Rasche, forcing a canine grin. "It's 'all good.'" Rasche hooked his fingers around his words with air quotes.

Yikes.

“But I feel you, dawg,” said Rasche. He offered a fist bump to show he was on Will’s side. “It’s all pret-ty awesome and amazing. As you will see.”

As they walked past the long counter outside the principal’s office, the staff behind the counter beamed at Will. One even gave him a thumbs-up.

Something’s totally messed up.

Principal Ed Barton bounded out of his office. The hearty, pie-faced man pumped Will’s hand, as breathless and buoyant as if Will had just won the state science fair.

“Mr. West, come in, come in. Good to see you again. How are you today?”

Even weirder. On any other day, armed with Will’s class photo and a bloodhound, Barton wouldn’t have been able to pick him out of a three-kid lineup that included Siamese twins.

But then Will always made a point of missing school photo day.

“To be honest, I’m kind of worried,” said Will as he and Mr. Rasche followed Barton into his office.

“About what, Will?”

“That everyone’s being so nice because you’re about to lay some tragic news on me.”

Barton chuckled and steered him inside. “Oh, no. Not at all.”

Rasche closed the door behind them. A woman stood up from a chair in front of Barton’s desk and extended her hand. She was as tall as Will, athletic and lithe, wearing a dark tailored suit. Her straight blond hair was pulled back in a crisp ponytail. A pricey leather briefcase rested at her flashy spiked heels.

“Will, this is Dr. Robbins,” said Barton.

“Really nice to meet you, Will,” she said. Her grip was strong, and her violet eyes sharp.

Whoever she is, Will thought, the doctor is smoking hot.

“Dr. Robbins is here with some incredibly exciting news,” said Barton.

“You’re a hard-core facts and numbers guy, aren’t you, Will?” asked Robbins.

“As opposed to . . .”

“A sucker for marketing slogans and subliminal advertising designed to paralyze your conscious mind and shut down rational impulse control by stimulating your lower brain?”

Will hesitated. “That depends on what you’re trying to sell me.”

Dr. Robbins smiled. She leaned down, picked up her briefcase, and slipped out a sleek black metallic laptop. She set it on Barton’s desk and opened it. The screen lit up with a waterfall of data that arranged artfully into animated graphs.

Principal Barton sat down behind his desk. “Will, do you remember the standardized test you and your classmates took in September?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Will.

Dr. Robbins said, “That test is conducted by the National Scholastic Evaluation Agency. On every tenth grader at every public school in the country.” She pointed to a large cluster of squiggling lines in the middle of the chart on her laptop’s screen. “These are the nationwide average scores they’ve collected over the last five years.”

Robbins punched a key; the image zoomed in on the top of the chart, which blossomed into a smaller group of what looked like dancing sixteenth notes. “These are the scores of National Merit Scholars,” she said. “The top two percent of the database.”

Dr. Robbins punched another key, and the image moved again, zooming in on a single red dot above the highest cluster. Alone.

Tendrils of fear wrapped around Will’s gut. *Uh-oh*, he thought.

“This,” she said, “is you. One in, to be precise, 2.3567 million.” She cocked her head to the side and smiled again, dazzling and sympathetic.

Will’s heart skipped a beat. He tried to hide his shock as a single thought raced through his mind: *How did this happen?*

“Attaboy, Will,” said Barton, rubbing his hands with glee. “What do you think about that?”

Will had attended the man’s stunningly average high school for less than two weeks when he took that test, but Barton clearly intended to grab whatever credit he could for his results.

“Will?” asked Dr. Robbins.

“Sorry. I’m kind of . . . speechless.”

“Perfectly understandable,” she said. “We can go over specifics if you like—”

A buzzer on Barton’s console sounded. Barton snapped his fingers at Rasche, who turned and opened the door. Will’s mother walked in wearing a scarf around her neck, her eyes hidden behind her big sunglasses.

Will looked for some indication of her disappointment—he had screwed up big-time and blown his anonymity—but his mother just smiled at him. “Isn’t it exciting?” she said, rushing to give him a hug. “I came as soon as Dr. Robbins called.”

Will pulled back and caught his reflection in his mother’s mirrored sunglasses. That was odd. She never wore sunglasses indoors. Was she wearing them now so he couldn’t see her eyes? She was acting all excited for the benefit of the other adults in the room, but Will knew she had to be really angry with him.

As Belinda stepped back, Will caught a faint trace of cigarettes. *Odd. She must have been around some smokers at her office. Could workers in California legally light up anymore?*

Will's phone buzzed. It was a text from Dad: CONGRATULATIONS, SON! Mom must have called him with the news.

Will's mom shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with everyone in the room. Then Dr. Robbins took charge again. "If you'd indulge me, Will," she said, "and if everyone will excuse us, I'd like you to take one other quick, simple test."

"What for?"

"Curiosity," she said simply. "When somebody shatters the existing statistical model, scientific minds crave confirmation. What do you say? Are you up for it?"

"If I say no, what's the worst that could happen?" asked Will.

"You go back to class, finish your day, and forget we ever had this conversation," she said.

Talk about a convincing argument. "Let's do it," said Will.

THE TEST

WILL TRAILED DR. Robbins down the hall to an empty office with a small table and two chairs. A black tablet computer the size of a small square chalkboard rested on the table. Robbins sat on one side and silently offered Will the opposite chair.

Dr. Robbins tapped the tablet and it powered up with a faintly audible *whoosh*. Using her fingers, she stretched out the dimensions of the borderless black square the way a sculptor might manipulate wet clay. Except the tablet was made of metal. When she was done, the tablet had grown in size until it nearly covered the entire table.

“What the heck is this thing?” asked Will.

“Ah. That would be telling,” she said playfully. “Put your hands here, please.”

The glowing outlines of a pair of hands appeared on the screen. The blackness beneath the lines glistened, as if there were unseen depths below. Will felt like he was staring into the still water of a moonlit lake.

Will set his hands down just inside the lines. The instant he made contact, the screen thrummed with energy. The lines glowed brighter, then faded, leaving his hands floating on top of a bottomless liquid void.

“I’m going to ask you some questions,” Dr. Robbins said. “Feel free to respond any way you like. There are no wrong answers.”

“What if you ask the wrong questions?”

“What’s your name?”

“Will Melendez West.”

“Melendez. That’s your mother’s maiden name?”

“Yes.”

A pleasant wave of heat rose from the screen, washing over his hands like soft seawater before subsiding.

“And Will’s not short for William?”

“It’s not short for anything. They wanted a cooperative kid, so they named me the opposite of *won’t*.”

She didn’t smile. “How old are you, Will?”

“Fifteen.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“August fifteenth. Every year, like clockwork.”

A swirling riot of colors erupted from the depths below, then disappeared. Will had the disturbing thought that if he pushed his hands through the surface, he would fall right into the screen.

“Is this some kind of lie detector?” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. “Would it make you more comfortable if it were?”

“Is that a question from the test, or are you really asking?”

“Does it make a difference to you?”

“Are you going to answer all of my questions with questions?”

“Why, yes, I am, Will,” she said, smiling pleasantly. “I’m trying to distract you.”

Will’s defenses ratcheted up a notch. “Keep up the good work.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Cerulean blue. I had a little zinc tube of that paint once in art class. Real dark blue, like the sky on a cold, clear day —”

“It’s not an essay question. Where were you born?”

“Albuquerque,” he said. “We only lived there a few months. I can spell that for you, if you like.”

Subtle tones sounded from deep beneath his hands, like muted woodwinds. Corresponding shapes—obscure

mathematical symbols, or some archaic language he couldn't decipher—swam around below him in complex patterns.

"It's not a spelling bee, either. What's your father's name?"

"Jordan West."

"What does he do for a living?"

"He's a freelance rodeo clown."

"Hmm," she said, chewing on her lip. "That might have been a lie."

"Wow. You *are* good."

"Oh, it's not me," she said, then leaned forward, pointed to the screen, and whispered, "You can't fool the machine."

"Okay, busted. He's an academic researcher."

Robbins smiled. "That sounds slightly more plausible. In what field?"

"Neurobiology, at UC Santa Barbara."

"What is your mom's full name?"

"Belinda Melendez West."

"What does she do?"

"She works as a paralegal."

"Where is her family from?" asked Robbins.

Will raised an eyebrow. "The Melendezes? Barcelona. Her parents came here in the 1960s."

"Are your grandparents still living?"

"No."

"Did you know any of them?"

"Not that I remember."

"Would you classify yourself as Caucasian or Hispanic?"

"Neither. I'm American."

Dr. Robbins seemed to like that answer. "Where else has your family lived besides Albuquerque?"

"Tucson, Las Cruces, Phoenix, Flagstaff, La Jolla, last year Temecula, and then here in Ojai—"

"Why do your parents move around so much?"

Good question, Will thought. Out loud, he said, “That’s the price Dad pays for working in the exciting and highly competitive field of neurobiology.”

“This part’s going to hurt a little,” she said.

He felt something sharp and prickly—like a steel brush—scrape his palms as the surface of the tablet crackled with a hot flash of light that filled the room, then just as quickly went dark.

Will yanked his hands away in alarm. The surface of the screen glowed like a pool lit underwater. Dust and debris floating in the air above rushed down into the black square as if caught in the pull of a magnetic field. Then the light went out, the surface stabilized, and the black tablet shrank back to its original chalkboard size.

Okay, Will thought. *That is truly deeply weird.*

Will looked at his hands. Both palms were red, and they pulsed as if he’d set them on a hot stove. Robbins took his hands in hers and examined them.

“I warned you it was going to hurt,” she said softly.

“What’s all this really about?”

“Sorry for the mumbo jumbo, Will. You’ll understand eventually. Or you won’t.” She gave him back his hands. His palms already looked less inflamed.

“Thanks for clearing that up. How’d I do on your test?”

“I don’t know,” she said, smiling like she had a secret. “Why don’t you ask the Mystic Eight Ball?” Robbins held up the black tablet in front of him. A photo-real 3-D image of an eight ball appeared on-screen. “Go ahead.”

Will lowered his voice in a parody of concentration. “Did I pass the test?”

Robbins gave the tablet a shake. The “Eight Ball” revolved and revealed a small window on its opposite side. A miniature white tile floated into view: *Looking good!*

“There you go. So sayeth the oracle,” she said, sliding the tablet back into her bag. “I have one last question of my own, Will. Nothing to do with the test.”