

THE PALADIN PROPHECY

ALLIANCE



FIND YOUR POWER,
CHOOSE YOUR SIDE.

MARK FROST

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ABOUT THE BOOK

SOME PEOPLE WILL NEVER BE ORDINARY

Life's been one big adventure for Will West since he entered the Center. He has exposed a sinister underground society known as the Knights of Charlemagne and discovered incredible strengths and abilities he never knew he had.

Now, Will and his new friends must investigate the Knights shadowy purpose and separate friend from foe as they prepare for the coming fight.

A mysterious thriller from the screenwriter of *Fantastic Four* and co-creator of *Twin Peaks*.

ALLIANCE

THE PALADIN PROPHECY

BOOK II

MARK FROST

RHCP DIGITAL

No ONE CAN DO IT FOR YOU . . .

I live my life in growing orbits
Which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
But that will be my attempt.
I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
And I have been circling for a thousand years,
And I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
Or a great song.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

MARCH

Lyle Ogilvy had trouble staying dead.

During the past seven months, the medical staff had given up on him half a dozen times, only to realize that he was a case for which they could find no precedent in the history of medicine.

They finally had to admit that the question *Is he dead or alive?* had them baffled.

The answer was even harder to come by for anyone outside Lyle's inner circle, as his family and the school had agreed to and honored an ironclad confidentiality agreement about his condition. The mysterious truth was that, since the "unfortunate incident" last fall, Lyle had fallen into a bottomless coma and his vital signs remained a whisper. Six times they'd taken him off life support, but each time they'd hooked him back in because, while nothing they tried would revive him, Lyle's EEGs continued to demonstrate robust brain activity.

The only clue for the rest of the school that the controversial Ogilvy might still be on campus was the frequent, furtive presence of Lyle's parents. They had accepted the trauma team's recommendation that trying to move their son from his secure intensive care suite at the school's medical center could prove fatal. Because Lyle wasn't only a patient; he was also a prisoner, and if he ever did regain consciousness, he faced a long list of serious criminal charges.

So Lyle lay bedridden, as still as a marble replica throughout the winter months and into the spring. His eyes opened periodically, in no discernible pattern, and his pupils responded to light, one of the few encouraging signs the staff could point to.

As expected, with a feeding tube providing his only nourishment, Lyle's bulky overweight frame had melted like wax, apparently wasting away, but closer examination would have revealed that his muscles were growing leaner and more defined. Although the nurses turned him four times a day, because his customized bed was so oversized and they never saw him upright, none of them seemed to notice that the six-foot-two Lyle had grown three inches taller.

Persistent vegetative state, a phrase often used by the doctors when discussing Lyle, didn't come close to describing what was really going on inside him. Lyle's mind had not regained the use of words, but had he been able he might have said that lately he'd grown steadily more aware of his circumstances. He was even dimly able to "see" people coming and going from his room, whether his eyes were open or not.

And as the last of the late-season snows fell and the ice on Lake Waukoma retreated from its shores, something unusual stirred inside Lyle Ogilvy. If he could've settled on just one word to describe what he was going through, it would have been *Change*.

Spring was the growing season, and new life was stirring inside him, assimilating the old Lyle into something far more compelling and powerful. Another perception had recently begun to take shape in his cobwebbed consciousness as well. A rising sensation more felt than known, but Lyle felt it in every cell of his body.

Hunger.

* * *

"How do you feel?" asked the coach.

Numb. That's how Will felt at the moment. And not just from the bitter cold. *It exactly describes how I've felt for the last five months.*

“Do *you* think I can do it?” asked Will.

“I’m not the one who needs to answer that,” said Ira Jericho, arms folded, standing back from the edge.

“I know. But your opinion would be useful in helping me form mine.”

“Cop-out. Concentrate.”

Numb. Overwhelmed. Stuck trying to process and sort through more emotional trauma in one month than he’d been through in his lifetime.

Will and Coach Jericho stood on the eastern bank of Lake Waukoma, halfway through their daily training session, looking out at the water. Most of it was still covered by its winter sheet of ice, with sections of it breaking apart into a checkerboard pattern of isolated floes.

The weak sun drifted low in the west, touching the tree line now. Temperature in the low forties and dropping.

All winter, Will had spent two hours of every afternoon training with Coach Jericho. Like most kids his age, he craved routine and regularity, something that, because of his parents keeping them constantly on the move, had in his life forever been in short supply. After Christmas Will had thrown himself into his first full class load at the Center, the most daunting intellectual gauntlet he’d ever run. When his academic day ended, his training sessions with Jericho presented even tougher physical challenges.

Will had gone dead inside since the scandalous public “deaths” of his parents, and he knew exactly why. It was an involuntary way of protecting himself, maybe even a healthy one, from all the darkness surrounding his early life. So he understood the reasons but hardly felt motivated to change it, particularly during the therapy sessions he’d been required to undergo with Dr. Robbins, the school’s psychologist.

Every session with Robbins felt like walking through a minefield, giving her just enough details to suggest he was making progress without divulging any of the secrets he

needed to keep to himself. The whole experience left him hardly capable of feeling anything, which made the truth he was hiding easier to bear. He had learned to welcome the physical agony of his training with Jericho as the only sensations he could even experience. At least they let him know his body was still alive.

Will knelt down, stuck a hand in the water, and shivered. "It's about one degree above freezing," he said.

"Fall in, you'd die of hypothermia in less than five minutes," said Jericho. "That is, a *normal* kid would."

"Would you?"

"I'm not stupid enough to try," said the coach.

It'd been forty-two degrees when they left the field house at 3:20. It was overcast and damp, leaving the path through the woods muddy and cold as they jogged down to the lake. An altogether lousy April afternoon.

"But I am?" asked Will, sticking his semifrozen hand under his other arm to warm it back up.

"I didn't say that," said Jericho. "I just said you weren't normal. Can you do it?"

Coach had asked him that question, about so many different puzzling assignments, at least five hundred times during the past few months. The cross-country season was long over, and with most of the team booted out of school because of their involvement with the Knights of Charlemagne, Will had Jericho all to himself. He quickly realized that their daily sessions had been designed to do a whole lot more than teach him better technique on the track.

Each assignment Jericho presented to Will posed an unstated question: Are you strong enough? Are you tough enough? Are you committed enough to (fill in the blank)? Will pushed himself to always answer yes, but Jericho seemed maddeningly indifferent to his efforts, to the point where Will had decided the man was either insane or impossible to please, which only made him try harder. He

didn't know what kind of heat he'd get if he said no; he hadn't summoned up the courage to ever do it.

"Yes," said Will. "Yes, I can do it."

Jericho didn't react. He never seemed to react to anything. He just took in whatever Will said and rolled it around in his head, only responding when he had something to say. Most days he seldom said a word, but on occasion, without warning, Coach launched into long rambles outlining his unique philosophy, a mind-bending mash-up of New Age metaphysics and ancient mythology, filtered through the lens of Jericho's Native American lore and legends. The conventional back-and-forth rhythms of social interaction—the polite verbal lubrication that made people feel better about themselves and each other—meant nothing to him.

But what really drives me bat-crap crazy about this guy is that he never answers any of my questions, particularly the ones I most desperately want answers to, like: Why are we doing this stuff? What are you trying to teach me?

Whatever their purpose, Jericho's tasks grew more difficult as they worked through the winter. They were often purely, brutally physical—run from here to there, climb up this hill, jump down from that ledge. Sometimes they involved endurance—balance on this rock on one leg with your eyes closed and listen to the wind, or hold this excruciating posture for an hour until your muscles fail. Other times his "exercises" seemed to have no purpose whatsoever: Sit absolutely still, hold this stone falcon in your hand, clear your mind, and picture an earthen well. Now slowly lower a bucket into it, bring it back up, and drink deeply.

Whatever their purpose, Will grew steadily stronger. Increasingly confident of his unfolding abilities—the uncanny speed and stamina he'd discovered and the startling ways in which he could affect the world and those around him with just his mind.

So what is it going to be this time?

Jericho reached into the pocket of his rain gear, pulled out a shiny silver dollar, held it up for Will to see, and then hurled it as far as he could out into the lake. It landed and stuck in a large floating patch of ice nearly a hundred yards offshore.

“Don’t think about it,” said Jericho. “Go get it.”

Will turned and ran away from the lake for twenty strides, turned back, and accelerated straight toward the shore, nearing top speed with astonishing quickness. As he reached the shoreline—thinking *don’t think about it*—he left his feet and soared toward the first patch of ice ten feet out, felt his cleats crunch down into the crusty ice, sensed instantly it would collapse if he gave it his full weight, pushed off, and leaped out to the next patch eight feet to the left.

Another unstable wobble underfoot, but without losing momentum he leaped onto the next patch, and then the next, skipping across the water like a stone. Within seconds he skidded to a halt on the large central span of ice where Jericho’s dollar had landed. The floe rocked and swayed as his weight settled.

Will bent down to pick up the coin but the ice floe broke apart under his weight, with the coin on a section that was too small to support him now floating quickly away.

You’ve worked on this. Don’t panic. You know what to do.

Will focused on the silver dollar and held out his hand. He instantly felt a firm connection shoot through the air between himself and the coin.

Just do it quickly.

Will threw all his mental weight at the coin, felt its shape ease into his grasp, then tugged it back toward him. The coin rocked and swayed, then pulled loose from the ice and flew hard and fast toward him, hitting his hand with a loud smack. Will closed his hand around it, then held it up for Jericho to see and laughed, amazed at what he’d just done.

Then he heard a deep muted *twang* echo underfoot, like a string breaking on a huge off-key guitar. He immediately felt a fracture form in what was left of the ice beneath his feet and saw a fault line open at the water behind him, running rapidly in his direction.

“Oh crap.”

He looked back at the way he'd come, all his frozen stepping-stones still rocking in the water, drifting farther apart. With no time or space for a full run-up on the return trip, he took two steps and launched off the edge of the floe just as it split in half beneath his feet.

Landing on the nearest fragment, Will rocked and swayed like a novice surfer, only staying upright because his cleats nailed him to the ice. His calculations told him the next chunk was too far away so—again, without thinking—his mind reached down into the frigid water and pulled the ice block toward him. He leaped onto it and continued that way, vaulting from block to block, using his momentum to urge each floating step toward the next, as water washed over his shoes, freezing his feet up to the ankles.

Twenty yards from shore, the last stepping-stone ahead of him, barely a yard across, crumbled apart. In desperation, Will looked at Jericho, immobile on the shore, his whole posture a shrug. Will felt the block beneath him begin to implode, and his mind reached down to plumb and scan the desolate bed of the lake floor below, at least fifteen feet down and quickly running deeper: rocks, dead weeds, sluggish fish.

With the same fierce concentration, Will looked up and a pathway appeared to him, leading toward shore straight across the water. In desperation he flailed out along it, furiously churning his legs, creating so much surface tension that he felt it, just barely, support his weight.

His mind and his muscles sustained the effort to within a few feet of land before he finally plunged down into the water up to his knees and the shocking cold shot through

his whole body. He was on the rocky beach a few staggering steps later; then he ran toward Jericho.

His coach had a fire going on the sandbar beyond the rocks. A full, roaring campfire with kindling and split logs. Shivering, Will yanked off his shoes and track pants, sat on a flat rock, and held his frozen feet up near the flames, grateful for the warmth.

How? How did he start a fire like this that quickly?

Coach Jericho never questioned him directly about his powers, how they worked or where they came from. Will wouldn't have been able to answer anyway; he honestly didn't know. Jericho simply accepted what his eyes told him, that Will could do these astonishing things. As they'd worked to develop them, Will came to believe he could trust Jericho to keep his secrets. Coach didn't seem to have a hidden agenda, and Will never worried about him reporting back to anyone about what they were up to.

And as the months passed, in fleeting glimpses that never seemed quite accidental—like the fire that simply appeared on the lakeshore that dreary April morning—Will began to realize that Jericho could do some pretty astonishing things himself.

He always moved silently. Sometimes he seemed to change locations without moving at all. Once he'd shown up at the top of a waterfall about two seconds after Will had seen him at the bottom. And another time, although it came at the end of a grueling session that had Will nearly cross-eyed with exhaustion, he swore he saw Jericho standing in two places at once.

Jericho also insisted that Will always carry in his pocket the small stone figurine of a falcon Coach had given him as a gift. And every once in a while Jericho would order Will to stand still, then pull a handful of feathered sticks out of his pocket and—never explaining why—wave them around Will's head a few times, touching him on the head, neck, or shoulders.

If that was a little oddball, it was a small price to pay for the man's goodwill and mentorship. Will knew that the discipline and intensity of their daily work had become his primary method for coping with all his pain and sorrow. Maybe that was enough?

So Will filed his question about the fire with all the other unanswered ones about his enigmatic coach that he'd accumulated over the past six months. For instance, *Is it really true, Coach, that you're the great-great-grandson of Crazy Horse?*

Oh, and while I'm at it, might as well toss in "How did I run on top of the water?"

"Here's your silver eagle," said Will, and flipped the coin up at Jericho.

Jericho caught it in the palm of his hand. Standing on its edge. He covered it with his other hand and made it disappear with the flourish of a birthday-party magician.

Eyes twinkling, Jericho smiled broadly. A rare enough sight that Will was always amazed the man could actually shape his face into one.

"What did you learn?" asked Jericho.

"Water's wet. Ice is cold," said Will, his teeth still chattering.

"What else?"

Will felt a sudden spike of heat against his leg. He stuck a hand in his pocket and found the stone falcon he always carried. The rock should have been freezing, but it was hot to the touch, almost too hot to hold, like it held a living flame inside. He took it out and stared at it, gripping it lightly between his thumb and first finger.

"It won't hurt you," said Jericho.

Will closed his palm around it, feeling the heat penetrate his skin, but instead of burning him the warmth spread into his fingers and wrist and up his arm. At that moment a falcon's call sounded, somewhere in the sky high above them. Will looked up but couldn't spot the bird anywhere;

still, he felt his chest open, cold air rushing in, nourishing him at the deepest levels.

“What else do you know?” asked Jericho, smiling slightly.

“I feel like I’m back in my body,” said Will, breathing deeply, feeling the surge of heat shoot into his core and from there down and out through his limbs.

“That means you’re healed.”

Jericho was right. Will could feel vitality spreading deep into his muscles and bones. His mind tingled. His senses opened up to everything around him. He felt connected to the rocks, the wood, the fire, the sky, the lake. He was alive again.

He was AWAKE.

“So that’s what this has all been about?” asked Will. “Me and you. Helping me recover?”

“You tell me,” said Jericho.

“Yes.”

But there’s something more to it than that. Something else going on. You’re helping me prepare . . . but for what?

“Tell me what else you feel, Will.”

The events of last fall projected through his mind like a scrambled movie trailer: the destruction of his life in Ojai, the kidnapping and disappearance of his parents at the hands of Mr. Hobbes and the Black Caps, the attempt on his own life and those of his friends by Lyle Ogilvy and the Knights of Charlemagne.

“I feel . . .,” said Will, taking another deep breath, a surge building in his chest. “I feel really . . . angry.”

“Who are you mad at, Will?”

“The people who did this to me and my family.”

Jericho paused. “Hate wears you down and doesn’t hurt your enemy. It’s like taking poison and hoping your enemy will die.”

“I didn’t say I *hate* them,” said Will, looking right at him. “I just want to take them out.”

Jericho smiled his enigmatic smile.

#24: YOU CAN'T CHANGE ANYTHING IF YOU CAN'T CHANGE YOUR MIND.

Returning from the lake, Will burst through the pod door, brimming with energy. Brooke Springer sat at the dining room table, twirling a strand of her long blond curls, reading something on her tablet. She looked up, startled, when he came in, and their eyes met. Will felt an electric jolt but he didn't speak, hoping she'd break the ice first, say something, anything to him . . . a single welcoming word . . .

But Brooke's eyes shaded over and she looked away, with only the slightest nod of acknowledgment. No more than you'd give a total stranger sharing a ride in an elevator.

The same treatment he'd been getting from her since she came back to school three months ago. Will thought *hard* about finally calling her on the distance she'd put between them, the tension and alienation:

Why are you treating me like someone you don't even know when we were so close a few months ago? As close as I've ever felt to anyone not named West.

But if he said one word about this now, he knew his restraint would break and he wouldn't be able to stop until he'd poured out everything he'd been holding inside.

Not the right time.

Will grabbed some water from the kitchen and sailed straight to his room. He closed the door loudly, but with control, then paced around from wall to wall, trying to decide where to start.

He grabbed Dad's List of Rules and opened it randomly, looking for guidance, and the List didn't disappoint. His eyes fell on:

#74: 99 PERCENT OF THE THINGS YOU WORRY ABOUT NEVER HAPPEN. DOES THAT MEAN WORRYING WORKS OR THAT IT'S A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME AND ENERGY? YOU DECIDE.

Okay, thought Will. Today let's say worrying works. What do I do next?

He flipped through the book again, stopped randomly, and landed on:

#22: WHENEVER YOUR HEAD IS TOO FULL OF NOISE,
MAKE A LIST.

That felt like the best advice Dad had ever given him. His notebook couldn't help him work this out; he needed to go old-school technology. Will locked the door, sat at his desk with an oversized sketchpad, and went to work getting it all out on paper.

And whatever you do, don't start with Brooke.

Six weeks remained in the school year; then summer vacation loomed, a yawning void he'd been dreading, with no idea how he'd be able to fill it. *But that could be a plus.* Now that he felt back on his game, he had six weeks to identify what he needed to do and how to go about it. All the unfinished business from last fall that he'd had to hang on a hook, for self-preservation, while his mind, body, and soul knit themselves back together.

Will began writing down questions in big capital letters:

HOW ARE THE KNIGHTS OF CHARLEMAGNE CONNECTED
TO MR. HOBBS AND THE BLACK CAPS?

Will had every reason to think the Knights were finished after they'd tried to kill him last November. Ten of the twelve Knights had been arrested. Only the group's leader, Lyle Ogilvy, and Lyle's partner in crime, Todd Hodak, remained at large. Todd hadn't been seen or heard from since the attack. Lyle's whereabouts, a frequent subject of campus rumors, remained unknown. Will knew there wasn't much left of the Lyle he'd known, after barely surviving an attack from the wendigo that he'd summoned to destroy Will.

But can I be absolutely sure that the Knights were destroyed?

Will and his roommates had discovered frightening proof of a connection between the men he called the Black Caps—who'd chased him out of Ojai, then kidnapped his parents and made it look like they'd died in a plane crash—and the Knights. They'd found a videotape of a meeting recorded by Ronnie Murso—the roommate Will had replaced in their pod, who'd been missing for nearly a year. A tape that, before he and his father disappeared on a fishing trip, Ronnie had gone to heroic lengths to hide from everyone *but* his roommates, leaving a coded trail of clues to his secret that Will and his roommates had been able to crack.

Ronnie's recording covertly captured a meeting between the Caps' leader, the fearsome bald man Mr. Hobbes, and Lyle Ogilvy. Hobbes could be seen giving Lyle a piece of aphotic technology he called a Carver, a mysterious device that could be used to open a portal between here and a dimension called the Never-Was.

Will had learned (from his dead-undead-badass Special Forces helicopter pilot-guardian Sergeant Dave Gunner) that the Never-Was is a purgatorial dimension where the monsters he called the Other Team came from. A prison where this elder race of beings had been banished from Earth eons ago by the celestial organization that Dave worked for—the Hierarchy. The same group Dave claimed Will now worked for as well, as a low-ranking "initiate." With the treacherous help of human collaborators, like the Knights and Caps, the Other Team had long been planning a jailbreak in order to retake control of the planet, and the agents of the Hierarchy were all that stood in their way.

When Mr. Hobbes, posing as a federal agent, tried to kidnap him, Will also realized that the bald man was some kind of monster/human hybrid himself. Hobbes hadn't shown himself since. How could he and his roommates hope to stop creatures like Hobbes and his minions? He could

barely write fast enough to keep up with his thoughts, trying to make sense of all the connections.

THE ABILITIES WE HAVE TO FIGHT WITH

ME:

- Speed (from enhanced fast-twitch muscles, as well as ... ?)
- Incredible stamina (extreme oxygen-binding ability in my red blood cells)
- Amazing restorative ability/self-healing (related to the blood condition)
- Telekinesis: the ability to create energy and apply it to objects or people with my mind (freaky; no idea WHERE this comes from)
- Possibly related: the ability to extend my senses away from my body and receive precise impressions about the world around me. Maybe by tuning in to patterns of magnetic waves? (Don't know if this ability has a name—even in fiction—but I call it the Grid)
- Telepathy: the ability to communicate "thought pictures" and words into the minds of others (likewise, something I've been able to do since childhood but never had a name for it)
- Dad's Book of Rules ... not an ability, really, but a damn helpful ace up my sleeve

AJAY JANIKOWSKI:

- Incredible vision, as good or better than an eagle crossed with a top-gun pilot
- Photographic memory: registers virtually everything he sees (and somehow doesn't suffer from brain congestion)

- Total recall: nothing seen by his eye ever gets forgotten by his mind (Where does he put it all? Check to see if he's had brain MRI yet.)

NICK McLEISH:

- Astonishing strength, agility, leaping ability, hand-eye-foot coordination
- World-class fighting skills, champion gymnast, master of half a dozen martial arts
- Heightened sense of direction (an ability shared by—why does this not surprise me—a large number of wild animals)
- Virtually—and perhaps stupidly—without fear (this might be less a “power” than a serious mental deficiency)

Which leads to . . .

- (Nick and Ajay: no sign of telepathy as yet. It's hard enough just talking with Nick.)

ELISE MOREAU:

- Sonic power: able to create, manipulate, and direct sound waves as physical force
- Telepathy: at least with ME, able to communicate without words and over undetermined distances (and getting stronger). Also capable of heightened psychological insights: intuition?
- Precognition and/or remote viewing: Possible intuitive ability to see future events, or ones taking place at far distances (anecdotal; untested and unconfirmed)

BROOKE SPRINGER:

- Incredible beauty (okay, not a superpower, but it might as well be based on how it works on me)
- The uncanny ability to stomp on my heart with the slightest glance

He drew a line through that and aggressively erased it.

- As for more specific powers???? Unknown (and what's up with that?)

He made note of Lyle's powers as well:

LYLE OGILVY:

- Telepathic attacks: ability to exert mind control and mental attacks
- Evil disposition: a possible victim of mind control himself (courtesy of a Ride Along, one of the worst Never-Was monsters)
- Also, bitten by a wendigo from the Never-Was. Ultimate effects of which are unknown—as are his whereabouts—but what I saw was nasty. Wherever he is, prognosis can't be good.

Will asked himself again, *Where do these powers come from?*

His working theory: *As a result of genetic manipulation performed on us during in vitro fertilization. As part of a secret medical/scientific program called the Paladin Prophecy.*

But it will remain just a theory until we find who did it, and why.

Will hadn't heard a single word or whisper from the one person who might have been able to answer that, his mysterious protector, Dave Gunner. Not a peep since Dave was pulled into a portal to the Never-Was while saving Will's life (for the *fifth* time!). After taking a bite out of Lyle Ogilvy, the wendigo had dragged Dave back into that horrifying place with him. Will had no idea how Dave could have survived. And where he might be now if—big if—he had. Dave had explained to Will that he was already dead—killed in a chopper crash during the Vietnam War—so could anything worse even happen to him? Will kicked himself for never asking Dave if that meant he couldn't be killed a *second* time. Would his guardian angel ever come to his aid *again*?

Because given the immense evil we're about to declare war against, I'll need all the help I can get. So where do we strike first? WHO'S AT THE EPICENTER OF ALL THIS?

Will looked at what he'd written. All the connections pointed to one name:

WE NEED TO FIND MR. HOBBS.

But Will had no idea where to start! Hobbes had always found *him*. They knew Hobbes had been at the Center—on Ronnie Murso's video, six months *before* he'd found Will. And for all they knew, Hobbes could be connected to the mysterious research program called the Paladin Prophecy, but his real role remained a stubborn mystery.

They had one other lead to go on. Will's friend Nando Gutierrez—the taxi driver he'd met in Ojai—had tailed Hobbes and his Black Caps to the Los Angeles Federal Building, tracking them to the office of a seemingly benign academic testing organization called the National Scholastic Evaluation Agency, or NSEA.

The NSEA turned out to be the *supervising agency* that had flagged Will's over-the-moon test scores and brought them to the attention of the Center (Ajay's and Elise's as well).

Not only that, but Will had also subsequently discovered that the Center *owned* the NSEA, through an organization called the Greenwood Foundation.

Will boiled the mystery down to the biggest unanswered questions: WHAT IS THE PALADIN PROPHECY? ARE THE KNIGHTS AND BLACK CAPS BEHIND IT? AND DOES IT INVOLVE THE CENTER?

Will hadn't proved his theory that the strange powers they'd started to manifest during the last year resulted from genetic manipulation performed during in vitro fertilization. But three of his roommates—Ajay, Nick, and Elise—*had* been able to confirm with their parents that, like Will, they'd been conceived and born in the same year as a result of in vitro procedures performed at privately owned fertility clinics in four distant cities.

What odds would Vegas give you on that being a coincidence? What about after you add in that the Center owns the NSEA and all of us end up here fifteen years later, in the same year each of us starts to manifest these strange powers?

But had all that been done as part of a plot called the Paladin Prophecy? That was THE QUESTION. Which forced Will to finally look at the area that might provide the answer:

He'd spent his whole life believing that he was Will Melendez West, the only son of Jordan West, a low-profile scientific researcher, and Belinda Melendez West, a part-time paralegal. The Wests appeared to be perfectly ordinary, aside from the fact that they'd moved around so restlessly, every fifteen months on average. A puzzling pattern that now appeared to have complicated reasons.

Will had since learned that his father was in fact Dr. Hugh Greenwood, the grandson of Thomas Greenwood, the visionary educator who had founded the Center nearly a century ago. Hugh's father was Franklin Greenwood, only son of Thomas, who had succeeded his father as the school's second headmaster.

Will had cautiously poked around for information about Hugh and learned that he had taught at the Center and that he and his wife had left the school—without explanation—sixteen years ago. Hugh had also graduated from the Center, but all other details of his parents' presence here had been erased, until he'd found a photograph in a seventeen-year-old yearbook. He took out the copy he'd made of it from his desk and looked at it for the thousandth time.

A casual moment of "Hugh and Carol" watching an outdoor student concert, with the following caption:
POPULAR SCIENCE TEACHER HUGH GREENWOOD AND WIFE CAROL ENJOY THE ANTICS AT THE ANNUAL HARVEST FESTIVAL.

It was “Jordan” and “Belinda” all right. Many years younger, of course, and their hair looked completely different—Hugh had a crew cut, while Carol wore a long blond ponytail. Hugh was clean-shaven, whereas “Jordan” had always worn a beard, and Will had only known “Belinda” as a brunette. Neither wore glasses or a hat in the photo, something they’d done frequently during Will’s childhood, perhaps, he realized now, as part of a disguise.

Why did they go on the run when they did? What made them leave the Center—and the attractions of Hugh’s great family legacy—so suddenly? If I have the timing right, that would have been after they’d known Carol was pregnant but before I was born. Was their flight from the Center related to their finding out about that in some way, and if so, how?

Biology had been Hugh Greenwood’s subject at the Center, and he was well liked by his students. A trained medical doctor, with a couple of related PhDs, his father’s later work as a researcher in neurobiology clearly had its foundation in his earlier life. But did he do it just to make a living, or was there something more to it?

Remember, when the Black Caps not only kidnapped my parents but also when they found us in Ojai, they broke into my father’s lab and stole all of his research.

What was Hugh Greenwood working on that scared the Caps into taking so big a risk? And what had Hobbes and his people done with them since?

Two weeks after the plane crash, federal officials claimed they’d identified the bodies in the wreck as those of Will’s parents. Will knew better than to believe them because a few days after the crash he’d received a painfully hopeful text message from his missing, and presumed dead, father. And because of a coded message inside it, Will never doubted that Jordan West had written it. He felt less hopeful about his mother’s survival, especially after he’d seen her infected with a Ride Along, the mind-control monster that was one of the Other Team’s most hideous weapons. His

mother might be gone, and he'd come to grips with that over the last few months.

But he believed one hundred percent that his father was *alive*, and that belief alone kept him going. Will had never breathed a word to his roommates about this devastating truth. He was afraid of the many unknowns that might come back to hurt them when they'd been through too much trying to help him already. He couldn't blame them if, just as he had, his roommates had decided to push all this insanity into the background, concentrate on their schooling, go along with the Center's explanation that the worst was behind them, and hope like hell it was true.

But with Will's reawakened attitude, he knew better: TROUBLE'S COMING BACK WITH A VENGEANCE, BECAUSE THIS TIME I'M TAKING THE FIGHT TO *THEM*.

He'd start slowly, with Ajay. They'd follow up on their earlier investigations and then formulate a strategy on how to proceed.

And that's how things went, until 9:14 p.m. on June 3, the last day of their sophomore year.

JUNE

After his last final exam of the year, Will returned to Pod G4-3 in Greenwood Hall, tossed his backpack aside, and was about to enter his bedroom when he spotted a letter, addressed to him, propped up on the dining room table. Hardly an everyday occurrence these days. Postmarked five days earlier, from a handwritten return address in Palm Desert, California, below the name N. DEANGELO.

Will took it into his room, propped up his school notebook, and sat at his desk. His syn-app appeared on the screen of the device, watching curiously as Will opened the envelope and unfolded a single-page letter written in the same neat, feminine hand as the address:

Dear Will West,

I must apologize for how long it has taken me to respond to your letter of last November. You see, it was sent to my former address in Santa Monica, where I haven't lived in over twelve years, and I've moved twice since then. It's only through the admirable persistence of our much-maligned postal service that it finally reached me two weeks ago.

Will flashed back to the letter he'd written last November to a Santa Monica address that Nando had helped him find. But that was to a woman named Nancy *Hughes*, a navy nurse who Dave had told him he'd known in Vietnam just before he died.

Your letter certainly got me thinking. I'm at an age now, recently retired, where you spend a lot of time remembering things. I thought the best way to answer your out-of-the-blue question—"Did you know a man during the Vietnam War named Sergeant Dave Gunner?"—would be to send you a photograph I've kept all these years.

Will found the photo attached to the back of the letter with a paper clip. An aging snapshot, in close-up, of a tanned and shirtless Dave reclining on a tropical beach, holding his sunglasses with one hand and winking, while giving a thumbs-up with the other. Wearing a devil-may-care grin, like he had the world by the scruff of the neck.

Looking *exactly* like the Dave Gunner Will had known, same guy, no question about it. The only difference: no disfiguring scars on his face from the chopper crash. That was yet to come, and apparently soon.

As you probably know, Dave didn't survive the war. In fact, he was killed two days after I took this picture. I was just a kid then, and we only knew each other a couple of days but he certainly made an impression. That's the kind of guy he was. So full of life he could hardly contain it. If anyone had met Dave, then I'm sure they'd never forget him, and his dying when he did, even with all that unimaginable violence going on around us, hit me hard as something senseless and tragic.

“I hear that,” said Will softly.

One more point. This is an even harder thing to describe, Will, but since then, more than a few times during my life, hard times, I've had a strong feeling that Dave was nearby. In a good way. I don't know if that sounds too awfully strange to you, but there it is, for what it's worth. It was a long time ago, and I'm married now, happily, to a really great fella, so I'll say no more about that.

But I did hang on to this photo for a very long time, didn't I?

Anyway, I hope I've answered your question.

Sincerely yours,

Nancy (Hughes) Deangelo, RN, retired

“Yes, you did, Nancy,” said Will. “You sure did.”

Will folded the letter and looked at the photograph of Dave again.

So full of life he could hardly contain it.

As he stared at the photograph, he felt a strong vibration issuing from his desk. He opened the top drawer, where he kept the pair of “black dice” that Dave had given him. Of course, when Dave used them, they functioned as some kind of holographic database that projected information he

requested into thin air, but ever since he'd thrown them Will's way, they'd stubbornly resisted looking or acting as anything other than ordinary dice.

But now the dice were oscillating in place so rapidly he could barely see them, and his whole desk was shaking.

"What's going on, Will?" asked Will's syn-app, looking up from the screen of his notebook, seated at a virtual version of the dining room table, which was also shaking.

"I don't know, Junior. It started after I opened this letter." Will had grown so comfortable with the constant presence of his miniaturized/computerized double that he'd started calling him Junior.

"May I see it please, Will?"

Will stood, picked up the notebook to stop the shaking, then held the letter up to the screen. "It's from that navy nurse you found the address for last year."

Will held up the photograph, too. Junior stood up and appeared to study them, while analyzing and scanning them into memory.

"That is the same guy, right?" asked Will. "In the other picture you found. That's Dave Gunner."

"Yes, it is, Will. I can definitely confirm that," said Junior. "It really makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It really, really does."

"I wonder what Nurse Nancy looked like way back then."

"Knowing Dave, it's a safe bet that back in the day she looked pretty doggone good."

"I've made a note of her current address," said Junior. "If you ever need to contact Ms. Hughes again."

"Thanks, Junior," said Will.

As soon as he put the letter away, his desk stopped shaking. He opened the drawer to look at the dice, as ordinary as a pair from a Monopoly game again. It suddenly seemed like a good idea to carry them around, so he picked them up and slipped them into his pocket.