

Five years before

The first time I saw Ray was when he walked into the lobby the day he arrived at Watson. He was called Anthony back then. I was supposed to be at lunch, not squeezed behind a large cement flowerpot, but I didn't have to worry about getting in trouble. I was more a part of Watson than half the teachers. Oh yeah, and the principal was my guardian.

Two men accompanied Anthony. The first was a thin, pale fellow who dug his fingers into the kid's shoulder to support himself. The other was Mr. Syme, the head of Watson Institute. I called him Shadow because he always seemed to be right behind me, especially when I didn't want him to be. Everyone at Watson got into trouble—right into the middle of trouble, actually, and then to the bottom of it. That's our job. But I was more trouble than the rest of the students combined, so he kept a close eye on me.

I had been reading in my position behind the flowerpot, but I decided this was the perfect time to practice some of those stealth observation skills we'd learned in class earlier that week. Ten-year-olds weren't taught many real techniques. Other than a few simple defense moves, we were basically instructed on how best to report to our seniors in case of a real event. I couldn't wait to be in the Red Group, the highest group, the group that got to do real stuff.

Red Group was a few years away. Right then the stealth observation seemed like good practice. I positioned myself on the balls of my feet, crouching behind the ferns. Rule #1: Never kneel. Always position yourself in a stance from which you can easily get up and run.

Anthony carried two duffel bags. His dark red hair was sort of curly and jumbly, and he had his head bowed, making

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it hard to see what color his eyes were. The gray Jersey City sweatshirt he wore looked old and slightly damp around the cuffs, and his jeans seemed a size too big. Nothing at first glance would tell me exactly what was going on with him.

I was especially curious because this was such an interesting occurrence. Watson Institute never got new students his age. Parents—usually former students themselves—enrolled their children around age two or three, *sometimes* as old as age five, so the kids could start learning at an early age and accelerated rate such crucial skills as *noticing* things. I myself had been enrolled at age zero. I assumed Anthony was ten, as he seemed about my age.

Shadow addressed the man who'd arrived with Anthony. "We've got lots of paperwork to do. Maybe Anthony could take his things up to his new room while we get some matters straightened out? I'm sure *someone* would be glad to help." His eyes slid around the room. "Isn't that right, Amber?"

I grumbled under my breath and stood up. It wasn't that Shadow actually saw me. He just expected me to be wherever I wasn't supposed to. He raised one eyebrow, but I could tell he was more exasperated than upset. His cheek always twitched when he tried to mask anger. It wasn't doing that now. I crossed my eyes at him in reply.

"Anthony, this is Amber Rind. Amber, this is Anthony Luther. He's going to be in room 716. Would you kindly lead the way?"

"I'm supposed to be at lunch," I told him, eyeing Anthony. He was avoiding everyone's eyes, staring off to the side.

Shadow sighed. "Anthony, Amber will show you to your room."

I scowled. I didn't mind the job, but I minded being ordered around like a Labrador. Sparing the adults another glare, I turned and strode down the hallway. Out of the corner

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of my eye I saw Anthony hesitate and look back at the man with Shadow. I wondered if the man was his dad.

"In here," I said when Anthony caught up with me by the stairwell. "Hope you don't mind walking a few stories."

Anthony stared at me for a moment, then looked away and began to climb. "Don't you have an elevator here?"

I took a second to process the sound of his voice, then dashed ahead so I was leading the way again. "Of course not, stupid. Elevators are too easy to stop, essentially trapping us inside. We always use stairs. This is the second floor, where the nurseries are, as well as the Green Group rooms. All the other dorms are on floors seven and eight. The classrooms are on the floors in-between. The first floor, where we just were, that's where the lobby and cafeteria and gyms are." I tried to improvise a tour guide tone.

"So what is this place?" Anthony asked, looking around as we reached the first landing. I waited impatiently on the next flight. "Dad didn't exactly say. I mean, what's the deal with the no elevators and stuff?" I sensed the curiosity and apprehension behind his words. "Are we training to be in the CIA or something?"

"Do you think the only secret agents are with the CIA?" I scoffed. "Sheez, what's your problem? Adults can't do all of the work all of the time. In fact," I said, "kids are better in some ways. Who's suspicious of children? That's why we're so good. We're good at helping *people*, not just dealing with international arguments and stuff. Like, if a thief is in town, we're the ones who'll get them. And we can pick up on so much more detail—" I stopped, aware I was starting to ramble. But I hated it when the new kids assumed that we were all just training for when we were adults. I only had to wait until I was fourteen, or sooner; if I was good enough, I might be in Red Group when I was thirteen. I *intended* to be good enough.

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Anthony was looking at me in surprise.

"What?" I asked.

"Girls train, too?"

"What, you think I'm Shadow's *daughter* or something? You think *that's* the reason I'm here?" I said, anger flaring inside me. "Of course girls go here! We're just as good as boys!" That was another thing I hated—when boys assumed they were superior. To prove my point, I stomped hard on Anthony's foot. While he was distracted, looking down, about to protest, I gave him a neat shove and pulled off his duffel bags, dislocating his center of gravity. He toppled over. I tossed the bags on top of him with a smug grin. I'd seen something like that when I was spying on a Red Group the week before. I'd been dying to try it out. Maybe this Anthony guy could come in handy.

"Chill!" Anthony yelled, scrambling up. "What's *your* problem? I was just asking! My dad made it sound like it was boys. That's all. I don't know very much."

"Sorry." I turned away so he wouldn't see me smirking. "But I do rest my case."

"You never needed one! I wasn't arguing."

True, I admitted silently. But it felt good. There were some boys who treated me like I wasn't as good as they, even though I could kick their eyeballs to Timbuktu if we actually did some real combat training. "Are you coming or what?"

"Or what," he muttered. We climbed another flight of stairs. At about floor five he stopped and switched his bag arm. "That was pretty neat, though," he said, not quite meeting my eyes. I was shocked, but didn't say anything. "Do you learn that stuff here?"

"Yes, but not until we're older," I told him proudly. "That was a Red Group move. I'm only in Yellow Group for now. Red is the highest."

"Well," was all Anthony said. I showed him to his room.

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"How do I get in?" he asked.

"The key's tucked under the door trim."

"Why? Isn't that obvious?"

"Yes," I told him, "but that's the point. It's so obvious no one would look there."

I turned to leave as Anthony fumbled for the key. Ten feet from the door I stopped and looked over my shoulder.

"Anthony?"

"Yeah?"

"Who brought you here?"

Anthony was quiet for a second. Then he said, "My dad."

"Oh." I couldn't find a way to reply to that tone, so I left.

The next day at breakfast, I stood in line fuming. I'd told Shay to stay in my room last night since Lyvia was showing signs of the flu. But she hadn't listened, so now both girls were sick. Classes weren't as fun without them. Plus, Shadow had pulled me aside that morning and asked me to baby-sit Anthony. Well, he didn't say it in those words, exactly. What he did say was, "Amber, you're practically a member of the faculty, so I feel I can trust you to help Anthony adjust to Watson Institute." And then he added some other stuff, but I didn't pay attention, knowing it was going to be just blab about how I could be a great role model if I wanted to and blah-blah-blah, which I got every day.

I took a piece of French toast and two glasses of orange juice. Vitamin C was my main food group.

I hesitated before I sat down when my eyes caught Anthony hovering at the edge of the room, obviously unsure where to sit. Sighing, I walked over to him.

"There's an empty table over here." I nodded to a small round table in the corner of the room. Anthony shot me a grateful look and followed me to it. I flopped down in my

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chair. Anthony sat down across from me, then seemed to decide that didn't work and awkwardly shifted ninety degrees to my left, his back to the wall. I drizzled syrup on my toast and began cutting it while waiting for him to say something. He stared at his food, picking little bits out and chewing very, very slowly. At first I wondered what his problem was. Then I saw his hand clenching the bottom of his new uniform shirt.

"Oh, are you nervous?"

I startled him and he jumped. He turned to me, slowly relaxing his grip.

"No," he said after a moment.

"Really."

"I'm not."

I rolled my eyes. Boys who pretended to be tough drove me insane. "It sure looks like it to *me*."

"I'm not," he repeated, then added in a whisper, "Terrified is more like it."

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch. "Scared we super spies'll kick your butt?"

"Sorta."

"Huh. You lucked out." I sawed at my thick toast. It was like trying to cut down a tree with a baseball bat. "The teachers have the Yellow Group learning observation right now. And in science we're doing *weather*."

The instant those words left my mouth, Anthony's eyes lit up.

"Weather? Really? I've always wanted to be a meteorologist," he said excitedly. "I'm telling you, it's going to snow today."

"The weatherman said it wouldn't. It's going to pass us by," I said, contradicting him. I rolled my eyes, unable to help feeling irritated. The one subject in school that I wasn't the best at was weather, and what do you know, it's my little charge's favorite.

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"But look!" Anthony pointed to the window. "See that dark gray line? That's the storm. And on my walk over here I found the wind was coming from the northeast." He opened what I'd thought was his watch and showed me a compass. "This was my mom's," he said quietly. "She was good at meteorology too." I didn't say anything as I gazed at the gold and blue instrument.

"But anyway, the wind was moving pretty fast. It was gusting around, maybe, twenty miles per hour. And a cold front's coming, and the jet stream should be moving the speed of the wind." Anthony finally stopped jabbering and leaned back, looking pleased. I scowled.

"If you *know* everything about *meteorology* already, why are you *here*?" I demanded. His face fell.

"Because my dad's getting too sick for me to live at home," he said quietly. "And he'd worked with Mr. Brothers, the previous principal, so he knew about Watson. For some reason he thinks this place will be good for me."

"What about your mom?" I asked, then I wished I hadn't. Maybe he was like me, maybe his mom died when he was young. Or maybe she was an ax murderer or a psycho. It was probably painful for him to talk about her.

But Anthony just shrugged. "She and my dad got divorced when I was four. She was a weather-channel host until then. But after the divorce she quit and went off on some big project. She moved, and I haven't seen her since. I get a few letters now and then. But that's it."

"Sorry," was all I could think to say. He didn't respond, only worked at his breakfast. I continued my attempts at hacking through my own meal.

Suddenly Anthony raised his head, eyes narrowed in my direction. "Wait a minute. What about *you*? Why are *you* here?"

"Sheez. You have fairness issues." I finally managed to

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tear a corner off my toast. I put it in my mouth and chewed slowly, eyes on Anthony, grinning as he started to scowl at me. I swallowed the gooey mass and put down my fork. "Okay, fine. I have my mom's last name—Rind. She went here when she was a kid, then went on to an adult espionage life. But when I was born she obviously couldn't keep me. Shadow's her old friend so I came here really early, when I was a baby. And then...it's been almost five years...since she died." I said it as quickly as I could. I hated telling my life story. The only part I didn't mind was letting the listener know how long I'd been at Watson.

"Who's Shadow?" Anthony asked, not making a fuss over my mom. I felt a rush of gratitude.

"Mr. Syme."

"Oh." Anthony kept his eyes on me, obviously waiting. I scrunched up my mouth, gratitude gone. If he was waiting to hear about my dad he could wait a long time, partly because I couldn't tell him anything. My mom had to keep his identity a secret from everyone, because of, duh, her line of work, so my dad probably didn't even know I existed.

I bent over and continued eating. Tired of trying to cut through the toast, I just picked up the whole piece, syrup and all, and bit my way through the meal.

Anthony was really, really good at predicting the weather and anything to do with air pressure, relative humidity, static electricity, whatever. Ms. Keen fawned over him the entire fourth period. He wasn't half-bad at the other classes, either. Miss Blume, the Inspections teacher, said he was the most observant first-timer ever, and according to his performance in scenario class fifth period, he was a really good judge of when was a good time to report back to older agents.

To top it off, it really did snow. When it started halfway

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through lunch, all the students flocked to the windows and started cheering. Anthony gave me a triumphant look. I crossed my eyes at him and shoveled grapefruit into my mouth so I wouldn't have to say anything.

The next day Shadow asked me to continue keeping an eye out for Anthony, to help him out whenever I could (read: let him tag along everywhere). So, with Lyvia and Shay still sick, I sat with him again for breakfast. I hadn't for dinner since we were allowed to eat in our rooms in the evening.

"It's going to rain," he said in greeting when I sat down in the vacant seat ninety degrees from his spot.

"Well, no duh, Einstein." I rolled my eyes to the window where dark, rolling clouds lined up on the horizon.

"Yeah, but do you know how much?" he countered.

"No."

"I'm guessing about a tenth of an inch, enough to wash away the snow, unfortunately. But the rain won't stay too long. It'll get turned back by the colder winds coming from that cold front I was telling you about."

"The rain's not with the cold front?"

"Come on, Amber, really. Those clouds are coming from the south!" Anthony pretended to hold a microphone and spoke in a deep news anchor voice. "In our next segment, we'll cover the arctic blast coming into Rochester, New York. Reports say the cold weather is heading north from the Caribbean, since, as everyone knows, it's freezing at the equator."

It was so stupid, I had to laugh. Anthony shook his head.

"Hey, well, how was I supposed to know it was the south?" I demanded.

"A good agent always knows what direction they're facing," Anthony said, quoting Ms. Keen. I stuck out my tongue at him and he shrugged. "It's important."

"Yeah, maybe. But I'd rather be doing something real."

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"You have to be good at the basics before you can be good at anything else." Anthony swallowed a bite of cereal while staring down at his tray.

"Since when are *you* an expert?" I said, annoyed that his remark made sense.

"I'm not. That's just something my dad used to say. He was a tennis coach."

"Was?" I blurted it out before I could catch myself.

Anthony didn't respond.

The next Monday, when Lyvia and Shay were feeling better again, we sat at our regular table by the vending machines. At first I started catching them up on what they'd missed, but then I saw Anthony sitting by himself in the corner.

"Would you guys mind if someone else sat here, too?" I spoke before considering the consequences.

"Who?" Shay asked.

"The new boy, Anthony Luther." I quickly added, "Sha—Mr. Syme asked me to look out for him, you know, since he is new and all."

Shay shrugged. I could tell she didn't want to hear the whole story. Lyvia nodded as she paged through a recent magazine.

I stood up and headed for Anthony's table.

"Hi."

Anthony looked up. "It's going to be cold today. Maybe cloud cover with some flurries in the afternoon, but don't believe the weather reports about an inch of rain."

"I won't," I assured him. "I was... Are you *really* eating that for breakfast?"

"What's wrong with it?" Anthony glanced at his tray. It held a cinnamon roll, a bowl of cereal, and a glass of milk.

"There's no ascorbic acid! Ever heard of Vitamin C?"

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"Oh." Anthony examined his plate again. "Why is Vitamin C so important?"

"A lack of Vitamin C can cause scurvy," I told him. "But I just came over to ask if you wanted to sit with us,"

Anthony shrugged. "Sure. If it's okay with all of you."

"It's fine," I said.

Anthony picked up his tray and followed me to our table. Shaking my head disapprovingly, I set my second glass of orange juice on his tray.

"Drink this," I ordered. Anthony obligingly took a sip. Lyvia and Shay looked unabashedly at him. I suddenly wished they wouldn't. He seemed uncomfortable enough.

"So, Anthony, what do you think of the weather prediction for tomorrow?" I mentioned the weather only to get some sort of conversation going. "Is it really going to stay snowy? Because Carrie proposed a ski trip at the last staff meeting and she wanted it to be sometime this week."

"Who?" Lyvia sounded exasperated as she slammed her magazine down on the table. "I hate it when you do that! Who's Carrie?"

"Ms. Keen."

"I don't really know yet," Anthony said. "Probably. Maybe another one or two inches tomorrow. That would be good, only I think it's going to be really light and fluffy."

"Oh. Why?" I asked.

"Well, for one, it's getting colder, and the colder it is, the smaller the snowflakes." He said this like it was obvious to every person in the world.

"Of course." I gave up trying to understand the weather and instead listened to Shay and Lyvia talk about how much fun a skiing trip would be for the last fifteen minutes of breakfast.

I noticed Anthony was fidgety during seventh period.

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We changed classes seventh period depending on the day of the week, and that Monday we had a cooking lesson. Not anything stupid like how to make microwave soup (we'd done that in second grade), but a real survival cooking lesson. Mr. Barton gave each of us four random wild ingredients and, with the help of a knife and a stove (in a weak representation of fire), we had to make a substantial meal.

I'd gotten the inside wood of a tree, ten heads of morel, eight ounces of chives, and two robin's eggs. Mr. Barton said my meal was amazing. I fried the eggs with chopped-up chives, but I didn't fry the morel so less water substance would escape. Mr. Barton also added that it was good to make the meal appealing (like I did) since it would help anybody else who might be with you to eat more. "Except for the disgusting tree wood, of course," he added. "But you could always eat that yourself." Then he'd moved on to Lyvia, who'd gotten a dead squirrel as one of her ingredients.

I had enjoyed the lesson, but Anthony seemed like he wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. The moment Mr. Barton told us to clean up, Anthony dumped his already gathered garbage into the trashcan and was out of there. I'd been done for a few minutes, so I picked up my workbook and followed.

"Hey! Wait up!" I called. Anthony stopped ten yards down the hall from me. I sprinted to where he stood, but as soon as I reached him, he began walking again. "Why are *you* in such a hurry?"

"I want to check my email."

"Why?" I asked as we started up the stairs.

"To see if my dad has written. I haven't heard from him in a while."

"Oh." Anthony often left me little else to say. I climbed the stairs two at a time to match his pace. He didn't object when I trailed him into room 716. Watson didn't have strict

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room policies. Mostly it was no boys in girls' rooms or vice-versa after eight in the evening. There were a few other restrictions, but it was mainly how lenient the teacher was—if he or she walked in on you. No one was going to make a fuss over ten-year-olds. Anyway, ew.

Anthony booted up his laptop and I sat on the edge of his armchair. Apparently Anthony, like me, had his own room.

It felt weird sitting there and not talking. "So what ingredients did you get?" I said to break the silence.

"Ingredients from in and around a deciduous forest. I was lucky. Horn of Plenty, parsley, brook trout, hazelnuts."

"What'd you do with them?"

"I made the parsley and hazelnuts into a salad. I didn't cut up the mushrooms, so I'd save the moisture."

Hmm. Smart kid. Wait a minute! "What about the fish?"

"Chopped it up raw," Anthony said, almost grinning. "Quicker, easier, less moisture wasted."

I made a face. "Raw?"

"Yeah. Ever had sushi?"

"Nope. Never felt the appeal to risk disease to eat a slippery piece of pathogen-ridden mush."

"It's good in restaurants."

"Never had it," I maintained.

"That's because you've never been anywhere but here."

"Not true! We go to the beach in the summer, and skiing, and..." I trailed off, seeing his point. I'd never *known* anything else. Everywhere else I'd gone was with the school. So? It didn't matter to me.

Anthony turned his attention back to the computer screen. After a few minutes he bit his lip and closed the laptop.

"What's the bad news? Fire? Bankruptcy? Moving?"

Anthony shook his head. "Nothing."

"Something."

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"Just shut up, okay?" Anthony pressed one hand to his forehead, hiding his eyes. I raised my eyebrows.

"Sorry."

He shook his head. "I didn't mean that. I meant...nothing. He didn't write. No big deal."

I almost said, "Really? It sure looks like a big deal", but stopped myself in time. He obviously didn't want to talk about it.

Anthony was great at everything that had to do with weather, but he was best at storms. Ms. Keen would ask a question and Anthony's hand would be the first in the air. Or if we were doing games or speed-question rounds, Anthony would have the perfect answer in less than a second. We timed him. His best was negative two-tenths of a second from the time the question ended to the time he started giving the (correct) answer.

"What kinds of clouds have thunderstorms?"

"Cumulonimbus."

"What is thunder?"

"The sound created by the fast expansion of air suddenly heated by lightning."

"True or false? Lightning bolts can have temperatures hotter than the surface of our sun."

"True."

The Thursday of that week Ms. Keen explained to (the rest of) us how humans could sense lightning before it touches down.

"It's the weirdest sensation, a prickling, almost, on the back of your neck," she said. "Okay, who thinks they can demonstrate the position to get in if you're, let's say, in a field during a storm and you know lightning is going to strike?"

Of course, Anthony's hand was the first one in the air.

Ms. Keen smiled. "Anthony, let's give someone else a

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try." Her tone implied the ending 'just for kicks'. "How about you, Kent?" she said, calling on one of my least favorite kids in the school. Kent was one of those annoying, egotistic jerks who still maintained that girls had cooties and were worse spies than boys. Which only went to show how much of an idiot he was.

Kent collapsed on the floor, lying sprawled on his back. I could see Anthony shaking his head before Kent was even all the way down.

"If you're like this you're not the highest thing in the field anymore." Kent smirked at Anthony across the room.

"*Hmm*," Ms. Keen said. "Kent, stay like that, for a minute, please. Anthony, could you show us what you had in mind?"

In response Anthony dropped to a crouch in between his desk and mine, wrapping his arms around his knees and tucking his chin to his chest. He balanced on the very tips of his toes.

Ms. Keen's smile broadened. "Good. Now, if these two were both in the field when the lightning hit, depending on how close and how powerful the lightning was, Anthony may never walk again."

"Ha," Kent whispered.

"But," Ms. Keen went on, walking over to Kent, "Kent, on the other hand, may never do *anything* again, and we'd all be planning a funeral right now."

"*What?*" Kent jumped to his feet. I saw Anthony grin into his knees.

The next Tuesday was when the dump truck hit. I'd made up that analogy when I was five, the week after I heard the news about my mom. It was perfect. Bad news was just like a dump truck, backing into you by mistake. And, sometimes, on purpose. First it hits you, and before you can

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absorb the shock it dumps its entire load on you so you collapse. Depending on the news, the dump truck could be carrying sand to bury you but not really hurt you, or it could be carrying bricks to bury you *and* leave a few bruises for good measure.

We were in science again. Anthony was grinning since he'd just won a double speed game of around-the-world about the atmosphere. I was settling back on the top of my desk for the next game, determined to make it to round three this time, when Shadow appeared in the doorway. He spoke to Ms. Keen for a moment, then called, "Mr. Luther? Can I...may I speak with you?"

I studied Shadow's face. There was a crease in the center of his forehead, his thin brown hair stuck to his sweaty brow, and his eyes were half-squinting in apprehension. A total dump truck face. Anthony's look of excitement vanished and was replaced by an anxious expression. *He's expecting something bad to happen*, I thought.

Anthony slowly made his way to the door. After a second's hesitation, I followed. Ms. Keen and Shadow both glanced at me, but neither one said anything.

Shadow walked silently toward his office. I fell into step beside Anthony. He didn't look at me. Instead, his hand curled around the bottom of his shirt like I'd seen him do the first day I ate breakfast with him. I wanted to say something, but at the same I time I found myself unable to speak. It was as if Anthony was a rubber band stretched near the breaking point, and anything I said would cause him to snap.

I stopped when we reached the office. A quick glance from Shadow told me I probably shouldn't go in with them. Under other circumstances I might have ignored him, but that day I did what I was supposed to do.

Shadow laid a gentle hand on Anthony's shoulder and led him inside. Anthony pulled his arm away, staring at

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Shadow like he was a total stranger. At that moment I felt terrible. I must have been getting sick.

I sat down against the wall on the right of the door to wait. It was about seven minutes later when Shadow slipped out of the office.

"What happened?" I demanded in a low voice as I scrambled up from the floor. Shadow opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. He gave me a long, serious look. I couldn't tell if he was sad or somber or upset, or if he was deciding whether or not to be angry with me. I raised my eyebrows in confusion.

"Amber...." Shadow let out a deep breath. "I just had to tell Anthony that his dad passed away last night."

I gaped, the sick feeling in my stomach deepening. Apparently Shadow noticed.

"I know. That's how I feel, too. But I can't...I'm not good at the whole comforting thing. I was wondering...since you...." He stopped again and stared at the wall behind me. "Since you know...what it's like...if you could...help Anthony...."

"Me?" I squeaked. "You think *I'm* good at that sort of stuff?"

"Can you try?" Shadow turned his gaze back to me. "Please? I know...that you can do it."

Shadow had always been more like a principal than an encouraging parent to me. I couldn't gather my thoughts for a moment. Then I shook my head. "I can try. But if it doesn't work, don't make me do it any more."

"Deal." Shadow sighed. "You have my permission to be absent from class. Go somewhere outside, in the fresh air..."

Shadow looked lost in his own world again. Giving me one last look, he retreated into the main office.

I saw the doorknob turn and Anthony stepped through the doorway. He stopped when he saw me standing there, and

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his hand instantly went to cover his eyes. I'd already seen them, though; they were red.

"Hey," I said, cringing at how awkward I sounded. Anthony stared at me from under his forearm. After a moment I continued. "Um...we don't have to go back to class."

"We don't?" Anthony's voice sounded thick, like he was speaking with a mouthful of cotton. I shook my head.

Shadow's voice intruded on my thoughts. *Go somewhere outside.* As I clenched my teeth I was struck by an uncharacteristic epiphany. I knew a perfect place. But I hesitated. It was my place, the old section of the wall out behind the piles of bricks and fencing that were used years ago when the building was a juvenile detention center. Now the school was a "Private Institution", but it still had enough reputation to keep normal people away. I went to the old wall to practice techniques I glimpsed when watching Red Group, or to read, or just think. I wasn't sure I was willing to share....

My contemplation lasted only a second. When I saw the obvious pain on Anthony's face, my defenses crumbled. I was pathetic, knocked to the floor with one blow, one *look*. I sighed.

"Do you want...to go...for a walk?" I was carefully choosing each word, like I was tiptoeing across an enemy hallway, testing each step for noises before I put my foot down (third grade, unit five).

It took Anthony a moment to reply. "I don't really want to do anything," he said, sounding somewhat like his usual frank self. "I honestly just need to get away from everyone."

"Okay." I felt uncomfortable, unsure if I was included in that 'everyone'. It was harder than I thought, watching the bricks from the dump truck slowly taking their toll. So I silently beckoned for him to follow me to the door. It was worth a try.

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We stepped out onto the yard. The air was crisp and the April sun struggled to eliminate the lazy, drifting clouds. The light that did reach the grass gave it a yellowy, alert look. In other words, it was too cheerful.

I led Anthony around the building and out along the path towards the edge of the property. As we walked, Anthony strained harder against the weight of the bricks, or maybe they were even boulders this time, until he was struggling to even walk in a straight line. I was relieved when we reached the wall and grudgingly pleased that it was an ideal location. The old junk, like dilapidated desks, outdated refrigerators, and an old yellow teeter-totter, shielded the four-foot ledge from view of the school, and in turn, we couldn't see the school either.

Without invitation Anthony stumbled to the brick and cement wall and collapsed against it, sliding down like I had by Shadow's office. He pulled his knees to his chest and dropped his forehead to them, wrapping his arms around his legs to finalize the movement.

Once again, I didn't know what to do. When a minute passed without Anthony lifting his head, I slowly sat down in the powdery dirt five feet in front of him. I didn't know if Anthony was crying or thinking or trying to push away the boulders. I knew he would, eventually; I had as a five-year-old, hadn't I? But I knew it would also take time and pain and a whole lot of waking up. I felt a strange helplessness as I watched the uneven rise and fall of Anthony's shoulders. And indecision. Should I help him? Comfort him? Do nothing?

It was like that for fifteen minutes. Then twenty. It was going on twenty-five when Anthony finally raised his head and scrubbed at his eyes with his palms. I still saw the streaks tears had left on his cheeks. Then he slowly lowered his arms and stared at the ground. His dark red hair was a jumbled, carefree mess that stood out in huge contrast to the anguished

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pools of ultramarine that were his eyes.

I knew it wasn't really like that. It was impossible for eyes to actually look that animated, that extremely sad. But I guess my mind couldn't help imagining it, couldn't help comparing it to the hollow pain I'd felt five years ago.

"He knew it."

Anthony spoke so quietly I wasn't sure I was supposed to have heard. I didn't respond, allowing him a way out, but he went on, getting slightly louder.

"He must have known he was too sick, despite those stupid optimistic doctors. That's why he brought me here, somewhere I'd be safe. Surrounded by all these...all these amazing fighters and strategists. He was always concerned about my safety, like I was about to run into trouble around every corner." Anthony shook his head, as if to knock down cobwebs inside his mind.

"Well, Watson is a safe place." I was speaking with the aim of distraction now. "Only a few elite members of the government know about us. Well, them and our counterpart and companion facilities in other locations. All of the parents--well, except yours, I mean--the parents usually went through the school themselves and are involved in Intelligence or Counterintelligence jobs. You know, adult politics and stuff. They want their kids to be a part of their world, so they come here, and in the beginning it's kind of like they're being cared for while their parents are working and stuff, and at the same time they are being taught. Normal people think we're some private academy, religious or correctional or something. I mean, it's like the invisible school."

Anthony just stared at me, face expressionless. "What if the kids don't want to be here?"

"Well, they can always choose, when they're older, to pursue a normal career." I didn't see why anyone *would*, though.

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"The way things work here, it's just weird." Anthony's voice was uncharacteristically harsh. "It's so different from my old school. I heard kids here talking about old students who actually died. And now it's supposed to be my home. Because my dad is dead." He swallows. "Oh, god, he's dead."

I reacted automatically this time and closed the distance between us until I was leaning against the wall right beside him.

"I know," was all I said. Anthony blinked, then nodded.

"That's right, you do," he said, his voice thick again with sorrow. "And you...lived. Did it seem like it at first, though?"

"No," I whispered. "It didn't. You really can't be prepared for it. Maybe it was even easier for me. My mom wasn't around all that often, but when she was.... But it's not like I had a dad to help at all. I don't even know who he is. Maybe he's dead, too." I heard Anthony make a noise in the back of his throat. "But..." I took a few breaths. "You still have your mom, right?"

"I guess." Anthony cocked his head. "Somewhere, I'm not sure where. But yes, I do."

"When you say 'I'm not sure where'..."

Anthony shrugged and traced, tracing a lumpy half-circle in the dirt by his foot. On second look I realized it was a cloud. Anthony marked it with 'sc', then said, "She's working on some project to do with her work, I think. I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to know about it, though. I get letters about once a year. She mostly asks about me. 'How are you doing, Anthony?' 'Is school okay?' 'Are you studying hard?' 'Noticed any interesting weather patterns lately?' And then I have to send them back to someplace in Europe, but I don't think that's where she is. It just gets passed along, I think...because of that project. But...." Anthony didn't seem like he could go on.

"Tell me about something," I said quickly to avoid

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another excruciating silence. And I knew it would help to get him talking about something else. The back of his mind would slowly be registering the news, but he wouldn't be conscious of it. And when he did become conscious of it again, it wouldn't hurt as bad. At least, that was my theory.

Anthony glanced up at me. "Like what?"

"Um..." I looked up at the sky. "I don't know. Something about weather. Tell me if I'm right. Those up there,"—I pointed—"are they cumulous clouds?"

"Yes."

"And those—way over there—are they cumulonimbus?"

"Yes."

"And the ones way, way up there, are they..." I contemplated. I had a good idea they were cirrostratus, but this was getting boring for Anthony. "Well, they're too big to be just cirrus, but too high for... Oh, high! I know, they're altocirronimbus."

"*Altocirronimbus*?" Anthony started laughing. "You've never heard that before, have you?"

"Why, haven't you?" I played along.

"No, partly because... I don't know, they don't *exist*, maybe?"

"Well, they do to me. If they're bigger than cirrus, and very high, there's no law that says it can't be an altocirronimbus cloud."

"No, there is a law," Anthony said with a snort. "It's called the law of science. And besides, cirro clouds are the high ones. Altos are medium height. So what you meant to say was cirrocirronimbus. Which still doesn't exist."

"You know what? I'm getting sick of clouds. Talk about something else, like lightning. How about that."

Anthony's eyes did that widen-and-light-up thing like when anything storm-related arose.

"Lightning! I'm good at that! See, okay, you know what

clouds are—"

"I thought we weren't talking about clouds."

"Well, you have to know this to understand lightning." Anthony settled his legs in a crossed position and swiped his hands across the dirt in front of him to make it smooth. "Clouds are evaporated water and other particles, like ice. During a storm the positive and negative charges in the cloud are separated." Anthony drew another cloud and put a "P" in the top half and an "N" in the bottom half. "The positive charges go to the top, and the negative charges settle at the bottom. Then during the storm they move around, creating buildup and discharge of electricity." He drew some lines around the cloud. "And then the negative leaders from the clouds and the positive streamers from the earth meet and the air glows. That's why you see it. The lightning."

"Do all meteorologists talk in gibberish?" I asked, not even trying to comprehend what he had just said.

Anthony shook his head. "That was a simple explanation! You should hear me about other kinds of storms, like tornadoes, or hurricanes."

"I'd rather not. God, how do you even remember *half* of this stuff?"

"I don't know. I honestly can't *not* remember it once I learn it. It's not like I'm spitting out facts and stuff. I'm *seeing* it inside my head and describing it. Because I can see it and understand it."

"Seriously? That's cool. And slightly weird. But mostly cool. For a meteorology geek, you know."

"Gee, thanks."

Anthony looked down at his knees again. Any other time I would've thought it was impossible for him to be getting bored of weather talk, but that's what it looked like now. And, of course, there were some exceptional circumstances.

I shifted my weight and stopped when I felt them in my

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pocket. My emergency Vitamin C drink powder packets. I grinned and pulled them out.

"Here," I said, handing the Cheerful Cherry flavor packet to him. I myself kept the Obsessive Orange. The only thing I didn't like about this particular brand was their terrible taste in alliterations. Or assonances.

"What do I do with this?" He took it and flipped it over to read the back.

"You eat it, dummy." I ripped the top of mine off and threw back my head, draining the powder out in one shake. I swished the stuff around in my mouth a few times, then swallowed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, but don't you usually drink these?"

"It won't kill you if it's not watered down. I actually like it better dry anyway. Try it. Come on. Do you want scurvy?"

"No." Anthony fiddled with the 'tear here' cut, then managed to rip off part of the top. He shook a little into his hand and dumped it on his tongue. His expression was downright comical. "Oh my *gosh!*" he cried, and spit into the dirt. "That's *strong!*"

"What did you expect?"

"How did you *do* that? Eating the whole thing at once?"

"I've gotten used to it."

"Thanks for the warning," Anthony muttered, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

"You're welcome. Now eat. You don't get nearly enough Vitamin C as you should."

Anthony tentatively tipped a little more powder into his mouth. He made a face like he was sucking on a lemon (yum), but managed to swallow. "There. Am I good now?"

"No."

"Well, forget it. I'm not swallowing any more." But he contradicted himself and tipped the packet cautiously in his mouth to try again. Then he pocketed the rest of the pack and

stared down at his hands.

I bit my lip. Now what to talk about? I really didn't know that much about Anthony, except that his birthday was April 14th, exactly a month before mine. And he loved weather. And was good at other things, and liked dogs, and his dad was dead now, and other stuff. But I knew nothing I could form into a good topic of conversation at that moment.

Luckily Anthony solved the problem for me.

"You're different, Amber."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." Anthony leaned his head back against the bricks. "But, I mean, different than lots of girls I know. For one thing, your name doesn't even begin to describe you."

"Why?" I'd never given much thought to my *name*. I was usually more concerned with my skills and stuff.

"Amber is translucent. It has color, sure, but you can see right through it, everything about it. Even the little bugs in the center. You're not like that at all. I never can guess what to expect. You're like..." Anthony's eyes slid shut. After a minute he said, "You're like a melon."

"That's just about the weirdest analogy I've ever heard. Why am I like a *melon*?" I was wondering if he was nuts. It wasn't very often—well, actually, never—that someone compared me to a popular fruit. Most often I was being compared to a bomb or something.

"Because no one can see past your shell. Metaphorically. You put up a barrier so nobody sees the real you, inside, unless they get past the skin, like on a melon. But inside, you're different. Like, you can be sweet. Or sour. But still different." Anthony opened his eyes and glanced sideways at me. "I know. I'm going to call you Melon from now on! Mel for short, so it's not too weird."

I was still trying to work out the first part. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like an insult to me. I spit back the first thing

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that came to mind. "Well, if 'melon' is a nickname that describes me, I guess I'll have to call *you* 'turdmuffin!'"

Anthony raised his eyebrows. I crossed my eyes back at him just as I heard Shadow's voice calling from the back of the school. "Amber? Anthony?"

I opened my mouth to tell Anthony not to run out and give the spot away, but I didn't need to. He had already crawled to the edge of the wall and to the walking track behind it. I followed.

"Let's pretend we've been walking around the track," he suggested. I nodded.

"And when Shadow came out, we were walking on this side of the school so he didn't see us."

"Why do you call him 'Shadow'?" Anthony asked as we assumed a leisurely pace.

"I'm not really sure. He just pops up behind me all the time, like he's my shadow."

"You or everyone?"

"It seems like it's just me."

We rounded the curve and into Shadow's view. He hurried towards us.

"How..." he started to ask, but thankfully thought better of it. "I thought you might want some lunch. But Anthony, if you'd like to go up to your room, I'll send something up."

"Thanks," Anthony said quietly and slipped past Shadow. He walked quickly to the doors and disappeared inside. Shadow turned back to me.

"I thought you were going to stay out of it. At least for a whole hour or something," I said. Shadow ignored me.

"How did it go? How's he doing?" he asked.

"He seems like he's going to be okay. He's sad, but managing," I replied carefully. Shadow sighed with relief.

"Thank you so much. I'm really proud of you," he said, blinking. Another 'encouraging parent quote'. The

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administration must've been trying some new techniques.

I waited a moment, then ducked past him and headed to lunch. Shadow didn't follow me.

Anthony was the first from our table to arrive at breakfast the next morning. I grabbed my Friday special pancakes and two glasses of orange juice and headed for the table.

"Hello, Mel," he said quietly as I sat down across from him.

"Well, I've decided," I told him. I had. I'd come up with the perfect idea last night as I'd heard the teachers creaking by me outside, no doubt taking turns checking on Anthony. Lucky me had the only room on the third floor right next to the stairs.

"Decided what?"

"Your nickname."

"I get one, too?"

"If you get to label me as a melon it only seems fair I get to tattoo something on your reputation, too."

"I see. So what am I?" Anthony raised an eyebrow.

"Rain. Ray for short, so it's not too weird."

"And what is *Rain* supposed to say about me?"

"That you make everyone's day miserable." I crossed my eyes at him. "And I guess because you like weather, and rain is, like, weather's mascot or something." And because rain can be helpful, like with plants, and can cause some bad things to go away, like droughts. And his eyes were blue. Like rain, I guess. And because of the tears he'd cried the day before when the dump truck had hit. And it just seemed right.

"Ray," Anthony mused. "Well, it's better than *turdmuffin*, at least."

"So glad you approve," I said as Lyvia and Shay sat down. Anthony suddenly smirked at me. "What's with you?"

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"Guess what I just realized?" he said.

"I'm dying of suspense."

"What?" Lyvia asked. Anthony didn't glance at her, but kept grinning at me.

"Your new name is *Melon Rind*," he laughed.

"Shut up." I stuck my tongue out.

"What's with *Melon*?" Lyvia demanded.

"It's Amber's new name," Anthony said. I groaned as Lyvia snickered.

"So I should call her Melon?"

"Let's keep it at Mel for now," Anthony told her.

"Interesting." Shay tried to catch my eye. I scrunched up my nose at her.

"Well, if you're calling me *Mel*, you have to call him *Ray*," I said.

"When did you come up with these names, *Mel*?" Looking puzzled, Lyvia shook her head. I didn't answer. Neither did Anthony. Lyvia waited a few more seconds, then dove into an account of what happened during seventh period the day before. As she chattered on Anthony caught my eye and gave me a small grin. After a moment's hesitation, I returned it.