1

Beacon dropped his skateboard onto the cracked New York City sidewalk and pushed off. He weaved through the crowds, past brownstones and steel skyscrapers, churches and theaters and police stations. Cars zoomed past on the street. Horns honked and people yelled out cuss words. Chilly air blew across his face, carrying the scent of hot dogs and fresh-­poured concrete.

Beacon loved this board. He relished the rise and fall of the path under his wheels. He lived for the speed, came alive when he sailed past commuters and sliced across roadways. It didn’t matter where he was when he was on his board. He was home.

He whizzed around a busy street corner and saw a flash of white-­blond curls standing at a set of traffic lights. His heart lodged in his chest. Jane Middleton couldn’t be here, in New York City . . .
right?

He looked back, searching for Jane. But the girl had vanished. If she’d ever been there to begin with.

Beacon had become a paranoid mess ever since his family had gone on the run from the Sov. Every scritch behind him was a predator; every blond-­haired girl was his enemy ready to take him down. He was getting really sick of the constant fear, but unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

“Hey, watch it!”

Beacon turned back around just in time to avoid slamming into a construction worker. He jerked out of the way and stumbled off his board, rolling onto the concrete. The sidewalk traffic flowed around him as if he were just a lamppost and not an injured twelve-­year-­old boy.

“I’m okay, nobody panic,” Beacon muttered. He pushed himself up and wiped off his jeans.

And found the exact place he’d been looking for.

The flashing neon sign across the street announced “Ed’s Fast Cash Pawnshop.” There were about eight dollar symbols on the sign, which was what propelled Beacon to pick up his board and cross the street, even though his stomach felt like it was filled with slippery eels.

As Beacon got closer to the shop, he saw a homeless man and his dog sitting in front of the building. The massive chocolate Lab leaped like a puppy when Beacon approached. It pushed its body into Beacon’s legs, nearly toppling him with his eagerness to be petted. Beacon obliged, laughing as the dog’s tail spun like a windmill.

“Cute dog. What’s his name?” Beacon asked.

The man looked up from under the dark hood he wore low over his face. Beacon suppressed a gasp. It wasn’t a man, but a kid not much older than him. His face was covered in patches of freckles, and his wild mane of blond hair hung over hard blue eyes. The maroon T-­shirt he wore under his unzipped sweatshirt hung loosely on his thin frame.

The kid stared at him contemptuously.

“He’s really cute,” Beacon tried again. “He’s a Lab, right?”

The boy said nothing.

“Good talk,” Beacon muttered. He withdrew his hand and entered the pawnshop. The bell over the door jingled as he walked inside.

The place was dank and musty. Every inch of its cluttered shelves was filled with toasters and ironing boards, Xboxes and power tools and gaudy gold jewelry under smudged glass.

He approached the front counter, where a woman with a jam stain on her smock was watching a news report about unprecedented hurricanes blowing across the East Coast. Beacon pushed down the panic he always felt anytime he accidently caught one of these news reports and cleared his throat. The woman sighed heavily and looked over at him.

“Um, hi. I’m here to sell this.” Beacon hefted his skateboard.

He felt his throat get tight, and he swallowed hard. He couldn’t be a baby about this. His family needed money. It would be selfish and stupid to hang on to a Habitat skateboard worth hundreds of dollars when he could sell it and use the money to buy groceries for weeks.

After narrowly escaping Driftwood Harbor, Beacon, his twin sister, Everleigh, their dad, and Beacon’s new friend Arthur, had driven straight to New York City, an eight-­hour drive down the interstate from the fishing village. They’d planned to take out all of his dad’s savings at the bank, switch out the stolen Mercury Cougar for something less likely to get them all arrested for grand theft auto, then hit the road again. But his dad’s bank account had been frozen. They’d had no money for gas or food or . . . anything. So they were stuck here, what felt like a stone’s throw away from the town they’d discovered was controlled by shape-­shifting aliens.

“Put that here,” the woman said, slapping the counter.

Beacon slid his skateboard onto the counter. He’d gotten it for his eighth birthday. He’d received a handful of newer skateboards since then, but this one was his favorite. So when they’d moved from LA to Driftwood Harbor and he could only take his most important possessions, this had been the only skateboard he’d kept.

Now he would have none.

“I’ll give you twenty bucks for it,” the woman said.

“What?!” Beacon cried. “This board costs over three hundred dollars brand new!”

“Twenty bucks, take it or leave it.” The woman went back to watching the news. Beacon ground his teeth.

Five minutes later, he was shuffling down the street with a twenty-­dollar bill in his pocket.

Beacon walked. And walked, and walked, and walked. Soon, he was “home.”

A siren wailed as he stared up at the derelict apartment building.

He couldn’t believe he’d once scoffed at staying at Blackwater Lookout Bed-­and-­Breakfast. The inn practically looked like the Four Seasons Hotel compared to this place. Graffiti covered the crumbling brick facade. The windows that weren’t broken out entirely were covered in grime and had sheets for curtains. Scary-­looking men smoked on the stoop out front, and Beacon didn’t think they were smoking cigarettes.

But this was the only place they could afford. The landlord hadn’t cared about anything fancy like “background checks” or “identification” or . . . anything, really, as long as the rent was paid. So his dad had sold the car, and they’d used almost everything they got from it to put a roof over their heads for the next thirty days. They had about thirteen days left, and then things were going to get really interesting.

Beacon stepped inside. A medley of TV shows, screaming matches, and babies crying could be heard through the thin walls as he climbed up the steps to the third floor. He unlocked the door of apartment 304 and went inside.

Everleigh, Arthur, and the twins’ dad were crouched over something in the cramped living room. They didn’t even look up as he entered.

“Hey,” Beacon said.

“Oh, hey,” his dad said distractedly, running a hand over his bald patch. His tie was pulled loose and slung across his shoulder, a look Beacon was used to seeing lately as his dad and Arthur worked together on this or that.

“What are you guys doing?” Beacon asked.

“Come here. You have to see this!” Arthur said, beckoning him with a frantic sweep of his arm. He pushed up his cracked glasses and then bent over his work again.

Beacon stepped closer and peered over Arthur’s shoulder. On the stained indoor/outdoor carpet was some type of thick, plastic wand with wires sticking out of the end, like an octopus on a stick.

“What is it?” Beacon asked.

“It’s a PJ,” Arthur said, as if that explained everything.

Arthur was Beacon’s best friend and the president of YAT—­Youth Searching for Alien Truth (and no, it’s not YSAT, thanks for asking). Beacon had met Arthur in the woods in Driftwood Harbor after they’d moved from Los Angeles all the way to the tiny fishing village in Maine. They’d come for a “fresh start,” after the unexpected death of Beacon and Everleigh’s older brother, Jasper—­or so Beacon had thought.

The real reason they’d come was that their dad had been
recruited by the CIA to help an alien race called the Sovereign develop an antidote that would give humans the ability to breathe underwater so they’d have a chance of surviving the tsunamis and flooding soon to be caused by climate change. Only the “antidote” turned out to be an injection that turned humans into creepy, mind-­controlled lemmings who worked for the Sov. They’d even gotten ahold of Beacon’s own sister, who had gone from a sarcastic, moody tomboy who wore busted overalls to someone who did bake sale fundraisers with the Gold Stars and wore pink skirts.

“Ah, a PJ,” Beacon said knowledgeably.

“It stands for Personal Jumpstarter,” Arthur said. “I modeled it off an old TENS machine.”

“Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation,” Everleigh supplied
in response to Beacon’s confused look.

“My grandma bought one off an infomercial once,” Arthur continued. “For her arthritis. It’s a little machine that delivers small impulses through these electrodes that attach to your skin. They’re supposed to be for pain relief, but I figured with a little rewiring, we could use these to Jumpstart people the Sov mind-­controlled with their antidote. We can carry them as weapons. A lot more convenient than trying to get a Sov to walk into an electrically charged puddle.”

During Beacon’s frantic escape from the Sov’s underwater UFO, Beacon had accidentally electrocuted a whole group of Gold Stars who had been chasing him. Only the electrocution hadn’t killed them, like he’d thought it would, but zapped them out of their mind-­controlled state.

“Isn’t he a genius?” Beacon’s dad clapped Arthur warmly on the shoulder. Arthur beamed.

“Wow,” Beacon said. “This is really great. But are you sure we have the money for all this stuff?” He gestured at the wires and tubes all over the floor.

“There’s an entire alien race coming after us,” Everleigh said dismissively, pulling a strap of her overalls back over her shoulder. “I think self-­protection should be a priority. Besides, we didn’t spend anything on this. This is all stuff I got from the junkyard the other day. The stuff you said was useless junk, remember?”

“Oh.” Beacon suddenly felt like the kid in the group project who didn’t contribute anything but still got an A. Everleigh was a car mechanic prodigy, Arthur was Albert Einstein 2.0, and Beacon’s dad was a freaking CIA agent. What did Beacon bring to the table?

“So where were you just now?” his dad said.

A small bit of pride shot through him as he remembered his trip to the pawnshop. He did have something to contribute.

“Getting this,” Beacon said.

He produced the twenty-­dollar bill from his pocket. He expected his dad to be happy, but a frown creased his forehead.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Beacon said.

“Did you steal it?” Everleigh asked.

“What? No, of course not!” he said indignantly. “I just . . . sold my board.” He’d muttered the last part under his breath. He blinked fast and turned away so no one would see how close he was to crying.

“You sold your skateboard?” His dad was standing now.

“We needed the money,” Beacon said. “You don’t have a job. Money must be running out by now. What are we going to do when the rent is due?”

“I’ve applied at a few places,” his dad said. “I’m sure I’ll hear back soon. It’s all going to come together.”

“Wait a minute,” Arthur said, standing up. “What about my grandma?”

“What about your grandma?” Everleigh said, with all her usual grace and tact.

“I thought you said staying here was just temporary,” Arthur went on. “You said you’d bring me back to Driftwood Harbor once everything settled down. Now you’re talking about applying for jobs. That sounds pretty permanent.”

“Even if we had a car to get back to Driftwood Harbor, it would be a terrible idea,” Everleigh said. “What do you think is going to happen—­you’re just going to waltz back into town and they’re going to forget about the fact that they were keeping you as a prisoner in their underwater ship, and that you broke out, and oh, that you’re immune to the antidote they’re giving out to try to mind-­control
the entire population?” Everleigh shook her head. “You wouldn’t
just get to go back to your normal life, Arthur. They’d find you again. They’d probably do some more freaky experiments on you, too. Or did you miss all that the last three weeks?”

“So what, then? I just never get to talk to my grandma again?” Arthur said.

“No one said anything about that,” the twins’ dad said.

“I haven’t seen Grams in two weeks.” Arthur’s eyes were shiny behind his glasses. “She’s probably worried sick about me.”

“We’ll get you back there, if that’s what you really want,” the twins’ dad said. “But now just isn’t the safest time. The Sov and the CIA are still looking for us—­I saw an APB for a stolen 1968 Mercury Cougar at the precinct on the corner just last week. We need to wait until some of the heat dies down before we talk about bringing you back. Otherwise we’d just be putting everyone in danger. Including your grandma.”

“Can’t I just call her?” Arthur asked weakly.

“NO!”

Beacon, Everleigh, and their dad had all shouted it at the same time.

“Do you want to get us killed?” Everleigh said. “Because that’s exactly what would happen if you did that. The Sov are absolutely tapping your grandma’s phone. A phone call would be all it would take for them to know exactly where we are.”

“I could use a pay phone,” Arthur said. “At the library or something.”

“They could trace that,” the twins’ dad said. “They’d know we’re in New York. Right now the Sov probably assume we’ve gone to someplace like Japan, or Canada, at the very least. It would
have been the smart thing to do—­get as far away from Driftwood Harbor as possible. That’s probably the only reason we haven’t been found yet.”

All of a sudden, Beacon remembered the girl he’d seen on the street corner earlier. She’d looked so much like Jane. He briefly thought about mentioning the incident to his dad, but he quickly changed his mind. If he did, his dad would probably just decide that Beacon couldn’t go out without him. And there was only one thing worse than having a whole alien race and the US government after him, and that was being cooped up in this apartment that smelled like fish tacos 24-­7.

Besides, he knew it wasn’t really Jane. Not today, or any of the other times he could have sworn he’d seen her. He was just being paranoid. If Jane were here, she wouldn’t be following him around discreetly. She’d attack him, then drag them all back to Driftwood Harbor.

“What about a burner phone?” Arthur asked. “Those are untraceable.”

“Harder to trace, yes, but not impossible,” the twins’ dad said. “I’m sorry, Arthur, but we can’t take any chances of the Sov finding us. Everleigh, would you mind getting started on dinner?”

The conversation was over.

“You mean the Mr. Noodles?” Everleigh said.

Her dad charitably ignored her barb. “Yes, thanks, sweetie. Beacon and I have somewhere to be.”

“Wait, what?” Beacon said, standing up straighter.

“Grab your coat,” his dad said.

2

Twenty minutes later, they were standing in front of $$$$ Ed’s Fast Cash Pawnshop $$$$.

“What are we doing here?” Beacon asked.

“Getting your board back.” His dad walked inside, and Beacon hurried to follow.

“But, Dad—­”

“I know—­you wanted to help. And that’s very admirable.
But you’re a kid. It’s not your job to worry about rent and
groceries.”

Beacon gave his dad a meek half smile. He wanted to argue, but truthfully, knowing his dad had a plan and he didn’t have to worry about anything made a weight he didn’t know he’d been carrying
lift from his shoulders. Also, he was just happy he was getting his board back.

They approached the front counter.

“Excuse me?” his dad said to the woman. “My son was in here earlier today and he sold you his skateboard?”

The woman raised her eyebrows.

“It was in error,” his dad continued. “We’d like it back, please.”

“If it’s still available,” Beacon added quickly.

The woman pulled the board out from a pile of junk next to her desk and slammed it on the counter. “Forty dollars,” she said.

“What?!” Beacon cried. “But you only gave me twenty for it!”

“Forty dollars, take it or leave it.”

“But that’s not fair! That’s like, like extortion or something!” Beacon said.

Beacon’s dad held out a hand to silence him.

“Listen, Karen is it?” he said, looking at her name tag. “My son is ten years old.”

Beacon opened his mouth to argue that he was twelve, but his dad stepped on his foot under the counter.

“I’m sure you weren’t aware of that when you accepted this skateboard, as I’m certain you know that it’s illegal in the state of New York to accept an article from a person appearing to be under the age of twelve. Now, I know it’s just a misdemeanor offense, and if you have a clear record, there may not even be jail time involved, but some judges like to make examples out of people, especially
those seen to be taking advantage of vulnerable children, which I know wasn’t your intention.”

He opened his wallet and made sure Karen saw his shiny gold CIA badge while he fished around for the twenty-­dollar bill.
Karen’s eyes popped wide, and she sat up straight. His dad slid the money across the counter.

“So I’m sure you’d be happy to accept the twenty dollars you gave my son in exchange for the board.”

The woman gulped, then fumbled for the bill.

“Thank you, Karen.” His dad flashed her an insincere smile and turned around. Beacon hurriedly grabbed his board.

“That was so awesome!” Beacon whispered as they approached the front door.

He’d never seen his dad in CIA mode before. He always threw around phrases like “gross abuse of power” anytime Beacon begged him to use his badge to get what he wanted—­but it was undeniably cool.

“Was it because she was abusing her power?” Beacon said.

“What?” His dad arched an eyebrow.

“That you used your badge,” Beacon clarified.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Beacon frowned at his dad. Maybe he’d misread the situation.

The bell over the door jingled as they exited the pawnshop. Beacon was about to ask his dad if he really hadn’t flashed his badge on purpose, when he heard a growl. The homeless boy and his dog were back. The dog stood up alertly at the sight of them.

“Hey, little buddy,” Beacon said. “Remember me?” He stretched out his hand, and the dog growled again. Beacon snapped his hand back. “What got into you?” Beacon turned to his dad. “He was friendly earlier. I don’t know why he doesn’t like me now.”

But Beacon quickly realized that the dog wasn’t growling at him. The animal slouched toward his dad like a predator stalking its
prey.

“Whoa there, boy,” his dad said, backing up a step.

“Let him sniff you,” Beacon said. “Maybe that’ll help.”

“I’m not going near that thing,” his dad spat.

Beacon had never heard his dad talk that way about an animal before. But he’d also never seen him cornered like this, either.

“Hey, are you going to do something about your dog?” Beacon asked the homeless kid.

The kid gave him the same hostile stare he had earlier and didn’t move an inch. Unbelievable! He was just going to let his dog attack Beacon’s dad.

The dog crouched low on its front paws, wiggling its butt as if preparing to leap across the sidewalk. Its jowls pulled back, revealing sharp, slobbery teeth. A low, rumbling snarl issued from its throat. The little hairs on the back of Beacon’s neck prickled. His dad shrank away, bumping into a lamppost. The dog followed his movements, forcing his dad into a dingy alley. Beacon looked around for help. A few people walking by cast anxious expressions their way, but they just walked on, as if they were happy this was happening to someone else and not them.

“Tell your dog to back off!” Beacon cried frantically, turning to the homeless kid. But he was gone.

Beacon swung around and looked up and down the street. The kid was nowhere to be seen.

Another ferocious growl ripped his attention back to the alley. The dog was closing in on his dad.

Beacon didn’t know what to do. Put the dog in a chokehold? But what if the dog just attacked him instead? That thing was huge. There was no way he would be able to fight it off.

He knew what he had to do.

He ran back to the pawnshop and crashed through the door.

“Call the police!” he screamed. “A man is being attacked!”

Karen quickly picked up a phone. Beacon turned around to run back to his dad, but paused briefly at a shelf by the door. He grabbed the first thing he laid eyes on—­a weed trimmer. He yanked the pull cord on the trimmer and ran outside. The engine roared as he careened into the alley. He expected to find his dad on the ground, the dog gorging on him, a total bloodbath. But the dog was gone.

His dad calmly wiped dirt off his trousers.

“What the heck are you doing with that?” his dad called over the roar of the engine.

Beacon sheepishly lowered the weed trimmer and cut the gas. “Defending you. Where did the dog go?”

“I yelled at it and it got scared off.”

“Really?” Beacon said. The dog hadn’t seemed too skittish. His dad must have yelled really loudly for the dog to get scared. So strange that Beacon hadn’t heard him. The walls of the pawnshop must have been thick. Or maybe the trimmer engine had masked the sound. “Well, that’s good, I guess.” Beacon shook his head. “Man, I can’t believe that kid just took off. That dog could have killed you!”

Sirens wailed dully.

“Did you call the police?!” His dad’s eyes flashed with anger.

“Well . . . yeah. I wasn’t just going to let you get mauled by a dog,” he said defensively.

“No, no, of course, that was the right thing to do,” his dad said, softening. “But now that we’re out of harm’s way, we should probably get out of here. Better to stay off the police’s radar. You never know who’s in league with the Sov.”

“I guess so,” Beacon said. He still felt uneasy about his dad’s sudden anger. What had he expected him to do?

Beacon started to walk, and his dad raised his eyebrows.

“Uh, Beaks?” A slight grin pulled at his lips.

Beacon looked down. That’s when he realized he was still holding the weed trimmer. He felt his cheeks go red. His dad laughed, and some of the tension dissipated from Beacon’s body. His dad must have just had a bad moment earlier. And wasn’t he allowed? They were all feeling stressed and on edge lately.

“Oh, right. I guess I’ll just put this back, then,” Beacon said.

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That night, Beacon dreamed of home. In his dream, he woke up in his bed back in Los Angeles, moonlight filtering through the window onto his Tony Hawk poster. Something had woken him up, and he quickly realized what: He could hear Jasper outside his bedroom. He kicked off his sheets and crept into the darkened hall, following the sounds of Jasper’s laughter floating on the air, just out of reach.

The pantry closet was open an inch. When they were younger, they would crouch inside it during games of hide-­and-­seek.

And he’d just seen the door move.

“Jasper?” Beacon whispered, trying to keep his voice down so he didn’t wake his dad and sister.

No answer. The laughter had stopped.

Beacon crept closer to the pantry. Then he reached out and pulled on the doorknob. A massive tentacle slithered out of the door.

Beacon screamed.

“Wake up! Wake up!”

Beacon blinked open his eyes. Arthur was bent over him in the dark, his eyes huge behind his broken glasses.

“Are you okay?” Arthur asked. “You were screaming.”

“I was? Did I wake you up?” Beacon mumbled.

“No, I was already awake. Couldn’t sleep.”

Everleigh groaned and smacked her lips together. “Everything ’right?” she said.

Beacon swallowed. “Just a bad dream. Go back to bed.”

Everleigh was already snoring. His dad hadn’t woken up at all. An unsettled feeling came over him. His dad was usually such a light sleeper. He famously once asked Jasper to pipe down when he made a “racket” undoing his belt when they were all sharing a tent during a family camping trip.

Beacon pushed that thought out of his head. It was good that his dad was finally getting some rest. They all needed it.

Beacon lay back down and pulled his thin comforter up to his chin.

He tried to go back to bed, but he couldn’t fall asleep. The truth was, these dreams really bothered him. He used to hate the nightmares about Jasper underwater, but now he longed for any chance to see his brother’s face again. In his dreams now, Jasper was always just out of reach. Just around a corner. Just out of sight. It
was like the dream was designed to torture him. Punish him.

The worst part was, he knew he deserved it. He hadn’t thought about his brother all day. He’d been too busy, and Jasper hadn’t crossed his mind. But he knew that none of that was a good excuse. It had only been a little over a year since he died. What kind of a person didn’t think about their dead brother every waking moment of the day?

Is this how it will happen? Beacon wondered. How Jasper would be forgotten? First, a day without thinking of him. Then a week, then a month, until he couldn’t remember him ever being a part of their family at all? Frantically, Beacon tried to remember his brother’s face. His wide brown eyes, and the dimple that popped out in his cheek when he smiled big, which he always did. Beacon tried to remember his booming and infectious laugh. And slowly, slowly, his brother came back. Beacon’s breathing evened out, and he fell into a fitful sleep.