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The
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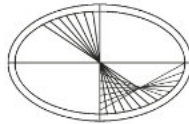


Ellen
Taylor

THE ALTERED MANUSCRIPT



**ELLEN
TAYLOR**



DIVERTIR
PUBLISHING
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The Altered Manuscript

Ellen Taylor

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Dedication

*Thanks Daniel for your support, and thanks Mike for helping Junior get out
of trouble*

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CHAPTER 1

BREE THREW OPEN the front door and bolted toward the bus stop. “Homework!” her mom shouted behind her, waving a fistful of papers in the air.

Bree skidded to a stop and turned around, kicking up freshly fallen snow as she ran back. The bus roared past right as she snatched her homework. She groaned and dashed back toward the street waving her arms. The squeals and shrieks of the old bus coming to a stop shattered the still morning air.

Her homework remained tight in her fist as she ran up the bus steps. The crystal blue eyes of the bus driver short-circuited her brain as he smiled at her, and garbled noises came out of her mouth that did not sound intelligent. He tipped his cowboy hat, and Bree used the moment to hide her face in her homework as she sped past him. One day his blue eyes wouldn’t disarm her so much. Once she was safe in her undeclared spot, she used the moment to calm her breathing and rub the wrinkles out of her homework against the brown pleather seat.

The window felt cool as she rested her head against it. Her short dark brown hair stuck to the condensation. Another storm loomed over the mountains, ready to dump more snow on the ground. Last night’s snowfall must not have been enough.

The bus made another stop, and Bree’s best friend Holly walked on with books clutched tight to her chest. The bus driver didn’t receive Holly’s usual not-so-secret backward glance today. Instead, her eyes focused on the floor until she slumped into the seat on the other side of the aisle from Bree. With trembling fingers, she pulled the hood of her coat over her shoulder-length blonde hair.

Bree cleared her throat in an exaggerated way. “What’s this?”

Holly looked over sheepishly as Bree looked at the empty space between them and cocked her eyebrow. “Um...”

“Get your body over here.” Bree stuffed her homework in her bag before hugging it close to give Holly more room.

“I thought with everything that happened at the party on Saturday—”

“Forget what happened.” Bree tilted her head to the side to let her friend know the space next to her was still empty.

“After all the drama I caused, you still want to be friends?” Holly asked.

“You didn’t cause the drama. Aubrielle did.”

Holly sighed and moved over to sit by Bree. “Thanks.”

“It’s what I’m here for.” Bree grinned. “On to more important things. How do we get a hot cowboy bus driver to pay attention to some sixteen-year-old sophomores?” A good chat about the bus driver’s hotness would distract them from the weekend drama.

Holly tapped her finger against her chin. “I thought about this last night. If a major disaster happens right now, we’ll be trapped in this bus for a couple of hours. We can play the part of damsels in distress, and he’ll save us, because he’s awesome. Then we’ll have the in we need to get to know him better.”

Bree suppressed a giggle. “If we wait for a natural disaster to happen before we talk to men, we’re going to be single the rest of our lives.”

A new kid got on the bus, which cut Holly’s chuckle short. They watched him sit in Holly’s old seat. He turned to the girls with a shy smile, making Holly perk up. Bree suspected it was because of the undivided attention from a boy with curly dark hair.

“Hello,” he said.

Out of her peripheral vision, Bree saw Holly lick her lips as she studied this new kid. Dark curly hair, sun-kissed skin in the middle of winter, vibrant green eyes; nothing drew Holly’s attention faster to a boy than green eyes and dark curly hair. In fact, thanks to all the sleepover chats, Bree realized this new kid somehow possessed every physical feature on Holly’s dream-boy list.

Bree cleared her throat. “Hi. Are you new?”

“Yeah. I moved in over the weekend. My name is Reggie.”

“Holly.” She thrust her hand out. “That’s my name. And this is Bree.”

“Glad to meet you.” Reggie shook her hand.

“You have soft hands.”

The urge to whack Holly’s foot was strong. Holly meant well, but her pre-school-aged flirting sounded creepy coming from a sixteen-year-old.

“What brings you here, Reggie?” Bree’s plan was simple—make sure

Reggie didn't feel so uneasy he'd bolt as soon as they reached school. It had happened before.

Reggie shrugged. "My dad got a new job."

"How old are you?" Holly asked.

"Sixteen."

"No car either, huh?" Bree asked.

"I have one, but my dad wanted me to ride the bus for a bit. See places, learn the route, and meet kids my age."

"You have a car?" Holly sounded like the bus driver offered to give her a back massage and feed her peeled grapes.

The urge overcame her, and Bree whacked Holly's foot with her own before smiling at Reggie. "I hope you like it here."

Reggie smirked, as if he knew something Bree didn't. It felt like someone took an eggbeater and began to churn her innards together.

"Oh, don't worry." The look in Reggie's eyes was anything but nonchalant. "I will."

§ § §

"Stop!"

I didn't mean to scream. The microphone could pick up the word even if I whispered. My hands trembled as I took off the headset, staring at the two computer screens on my desk. One screen held the text of my story, while the other played out the scene, now frozen in time.

My palms started to sweat. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. The boy named Reggie still sat there, watching Bree too close. He didn't belong. I didn't create him.

My legs trembled as I backed away from the two screens. A million nasty possibilities raced through my mind until I forced myself to stop. I worked hard to get the narration device. I did research to prove I wasn't a target. It was all in vain. The Rogue Narrator had entered my story.

CHAPTER 2

MY FEET CARRIED me back and forth in my little office. *Maybe this was a horrible trick.* I looked back at the screen where Reggie smiled in a far too knowing way. My knees weakened. I took a deep breath, and slowly let it out as I slumped back into my office chair. My eyes glazed over and landed on the little black box, the narration device, connected to the desk computer and my laptop. The truth of the situation washed over me.

I was in deep trouble.

The narration device was an amazing accidental discovery thirty years earlier when scientists were researching virtual reality. What they discovered changed entertainment forever. I could narrate a story, and the finish project would produce a book, an audiobook, and rough footage for a movie which faithfully followed every word. Directors could still take the rough footage, edit it down, and stick a soundtrack to it. However, those loyal to the book would still have a copy in its raw form.

My cell phone rang. I jumped, startled out of my reverie. "Hello?" I asked, putting the phone to my ear.

"Hello. This is Samantha, Vince Boyle's head secretary."

I braced against the wall to keep myself upright as my pretense of control slipped away. My heartbeat rang in my ears. "The Rogue. He's in my story, isn't he?"

The question was superfluous. For all the amazing things the narration device could do, no one dreamed a mad genius could create his own twisted device to enter other stories and wreak havoc in them.

Samantha sounded professional. "Yes. The Guardians request you stop narrating until you discuss your situation with them. How soon are you able to get here?"

The Guardians were the narration government. They made sure people did not abuse the narration device. They had been trying to catch

the Rogue for years. To even meet them, despite my troubling circumstances, would be an honor. I almost said I was ready right then before my eyes wandered to my sweatpants and baggy t-shirt. I didn't plan on going out in public today, let alone meet the four most influential people of my career.

"I'll be ready in thirty minutes."

"A cab will pick you up at the front of your apartment. Bring your narration ID."

I hung up and began making myself look presentable. Today I needed my lucky floral skirt with a white tank top and my green cardigan with quarter-length sleeves. I gave myself a good once over to figure out what needed the most work. Most of me looked great without too much work. My hair, on the other hand, always needed extra attention.

My black hair refused to be curled. By the time I finished curling my hair, the curls would already start falling out on one side. Doing nothing wasn't an option either—it was ridiculously thick, and despite it not being able to curl, it often looked like a tangle of weeds fluttering every which way. I hated my hair, but not enough to shave it. One of my elastic bands broke in the process of wrestling my hair into submission.

In a record-breaking time of twenty-five minutes, I walked out of the small apartment owned by the Guardians into the warm, early summer air. I sat on the front step, gripping my narration ID. It would have snapped in half if it wasn't made of heavy-duty material.

The small apartment building was one of three others, all owned by the Guardians. I lived on the ground floor and was the only narrator on the lot. The Guardians kept junior narrators near their headquarters while they narrated in case we ran into problems. They usually involved simple things, like the narration device shorting out. Or big things, like the Rogue.

The taxi arrived. I got up, hurried across the soft lawn, and slipped into the back seat.

"Guardians headquarters?" the driver asked.

"Yes please." The first of the rebellious strands of hair snuck out. I tucked them behind my ears. The prepaid drive was short, giving me no time to calm my fears.

The two-story marble building towered over me. It wasn't large,

but still commanded respect. I rubbed my arms to keep the nervousness at bay. I'd visited the headquarters once before when I won top honors for a writing contest in high school. This time was different.

I climbed the stairs, walked past the pillars, and opened the metal doors. Two secretaries at the front desk were making calls. One called and canceled an appointment in less than ten seconds. They rearranged the Guardians' busy schedules to accommodate my current situation. The feeling of being an inconvenience started to nag at my soul.

"May I help you?" The brunette secretary sounded professional while she scribbled something down on a notepad.

"Yes, um, hi." I tugged at the bottom button of my cardigan. "I'm the narrator."

"Ah yes." She gave me a look of pity. "Identification please?" I handed it over and she scanned the code. "They're waiting for you in the conference room. Go down this left hall until you reach room 116."

"Thank you." I took back my ID, happy my voice sounded normal. I glanced up at the second-floor balcony where the Guardians' had their offices before heading to room 116. My green flats echoed through the empty marble hall, making me want to tiptoe the rest of the way.

I opened the door and peeked inside. With a name like 'conference room' I'd pictured something grander—a spacious room with dramatic drapes over windows to make it look warm and inviting but still holding a theatrical feeling. What I found instead was a simple square room with a simple, raised rectangle table. The Guardians' names were on little plaques in front of where they sat. My breath caught in my throat. These four people were the best narrators, voted into their position because of their skill and experience. In my dream of dreams I wanted to be one, but I needed to survive my current situation before running for Guardianship.

The one older woman in the Guardians beamed at me as though we were long-lost friends. Her wrinkles were a reflection on how much she smiled in life. It gave me the courage to walk into the room. She was at the end of the table on the right. She had to be at least seventy but dressed smartly for her age. Her hair was more gray than black. Kind brown eyes watched me with concern behind simple glasses. Her plaque read 'Grace Alvarez' and my soul brightened. I didn't often read poetry, but hers was optimistic and moving with a touch of humor.

The three men in the Guardians didn't see me walk in. They were working on various electronic devices. I stood there, trying not to scratch the back of my leg. A fold-up chair faced the Guardians. They probably wanted me to sit, but no one offered the chair to me. Grace squinted at the other Guardians, but they didn't look up. Vince Boyle, the Chairman of the Guardians and owner of the nicest looking plaque, studied his laptop before comparing it to some documents in a folder. I tried to clear my dry throat, but it wasn't enough to announce myself.

Grace saw my distress and coughed. The other three looked up. She gave them a gentle look of chastisement before smiling at me. "Take a seat, dear."

I tiptoed over to the chair and sat down. "Hi!" I said too loudly.

Grace chuckled. Vince, who sat next to Grace, lowered his notes. He placed his hands on top of them and peered at me over his thick glasses. I shrank under his gaze.

Everything about Vince the Chairman was big. Portly figure, beefy hands, and big eyes made bigger by his thick glasses. His sandy blonde hair thinned at the top. He had a tattoo on his forearm he must have gotten when he was younger, because it stretched to the point I couldn't recognize the design. That or the tattoo artist needed to be fired.

"Hello, Miss, um." Vince moved his laptop and opened the folder underneath with my narration information.

"Just call me Junior." I tried hard not to sound annoyed.

He grunted. "We are here to help you, since your story has been infiltrated by the Rogue."

"I figured that out," I mumbled, though not quietly enough. Vince paused to give me an ugly glare. I made a mental note that this man didn't understand sarcasm. My sweaty palms squeaked as I gripped the bottom of the chair.

"I have a few questions." Grace looked at a sheet of paper and positioned her glasses closer to her eyes. "You are a recent college graduate?"

"Yes. You delivered the narration device to me a week before my graduation." It seemed strange to believe the delivery came a month ago.

"Your application says you did not take any classes from the Rogue, at the time called Professor Andrews. Correct?"

Lying didn't come easy for me. My mind held fast to my line of

logic, which kept guilt from playing across my face as my knuckles turned white. I didn't *technically* take a class from Professor Andrews. "No. I never took one of his classes."

Vince grunted again. I assume it meant he approved. "We are close to the Rogue's whereabouts. With your story distracting him, we will soon catch him."

"There has to be another way." I looked at the other Guardians. "I don't want to continue narrating."

The silence returned, but with more edge. Devin, one of the other Guardians, glanced at Vince to see his reaction. The other Guardian, Jim, gave me a sad smile. Jim was in newspaper articles and press conferences for something tied with the Rogue, but I didn't remember why. His dark brown hair was cropped short, and his dark brown eyes focused on me. His suit coat was tailored to make his thin body look more muscular. He was the youngest of the Guardians—I guessed late twenties or early thirties.

"Junior." Vince lowered his glasses down the bridge of his nose, completing the condescending look. "You signed a contract before we gave you the narration device. Your story belongs to us. The Rogue is almost caught. We demand your cooperation."

"I don't want my characters in more danger. It's been, what, three years since the Rogue started this? What's taking you so long?"

Vince's blue eyes darkened.

Devin raised his eyebrows. I couldn't tell if he was impressed or if he also saw me as a young, ambitious narrator with too many demands. He had light brown hair, his eyes were a deep shade of blue, and he looked in his mid-forties. He took minutes, but I knew his mind wasn't on the meeting.

"It sounds like you want to use my characters as bait," I said before Vince spoke again. "I need to know they'll be safe."

"You signed a binding contract." His kid gloves were off. I touched a nerve. "It states in times of emergency, the Guardians will do what they see fit with your story."

"Which is?"

"Have you narrate it. The Rogue is focused on you, and if we get anyone else to narrate your story, he will leave."

“That’s what I want! Give my rough draft to a professional! Get the Rogue out of my story! I’ll watch closely to make sure everything goes well.” I desperately wanted to narrate it myself, but if I did, my characters would be in danger. Having someone else do it was the best option.

Vince glared at me. “You will narrate it, because this is the only way to find the Rogue!”

I clenched my fists to control the anger surging through me. Before I could retort, Grace placed a hand on Vince’s arm. “Stop scaring the poor girl. She’s going through enough as it is.”

Was I scared? Possibly. I had a hard time keeping my emotions from my face.

“I know it’s tough. I know you’re afraid. Some of us don’t like the idea of using you or your characters as bait.” Grace’s eyes flickered over to Vince before she returned to me. “This way seems barbaric, but it’s produced the largest success rate. Of all the Rogue’s infiltrated stories, three turned out unsuccessful. Many narrators have characters with beautiful endings to their story despite the infiltration.”

The odds did sound nice, but the rumors swirling around about what happened to the three unsuccessful stories made me hesitant. Was it worth putting Bree at risk?

“We will not leave you alone. We’ll give you the aid of a Guardian to protect you and your characters,” Grace said.

It took me a moment to answer. “Okay.” I didn’t like it, but I’d agree to it. “Who’s helping me?” My eyes begged Vince to choose Grace.

“We will send our most qualified member.” Vince nodded in Devin’s direction. “Devin will help.”

Devin glanced up from the work he tried to do secretly under the table. “Um, sir? Could we talk?”

Jim and Grace exchanged uneasy glances. Vince’s eyes narrowed. “What.”

Devin cleared his throat and gestured toward the back of the room. He had the decency to give me a smile before taking Vince by the shoulder and leading him to the far-right corner. Maybe he hoped we wouldn’t eavesdrop, but it didn’t work. The room was small, after all.

“My schedule is booked for months,” Devin whispered.

“You’ve protected narrators before.”

“At the cost of my other work. I’m swamped. Either I search for the Rogue with Grace, or I protect Junior. I can’t do both anymore.”

My lips pressed together as I glared at the table. Grace looked uncomfortable. Jim went back to his work. I folded my arms and tapped my fingers against my skin.

“Everything will be fine, dear.” With Grace talking, I couldn’t overhear Devin and Vince’s discussion. “They’ll work something out.”

I continued to tap. “And yet the Rogue keeps getting away.”

“Believe me,” Jim said, talking for the first time. “You don’t need to lecture us on what the Rogue has done.”

“My main character is sixteen years old.” I straightened in my chair and leaned forward. “I’ve heard what the Rogue does to the main characters of failed books.”

Jim winced.

“Well, you have two choices in front of you,” Vince said as he and Devin returned to their seats. “There’s a small chance the Rogue will get your main character, or you can stop narrating, and after a month all your characters will be thrown into limbo.”

I held Vince’s stare for three seconds before turning away. His version of tough love took a chunk out of the respect I once had for him.

Narrators didn’t talk much about the limbo world, let alone joke about it. Every college class about narration drilled it into students about the limbo world. After a month of no narration, the device shuts down, and the characters enter the limbo world. The world was discovered ten years after the accidental discovery of the narration device. Characters ceased to exist in limbo, and no one had found a way to make them re-exist. It was more than cruel. It was inhumane. Only the Guardians saw the limbo world. For the most part, they didn’t like to talk about it. Apparently, Vince considered it okay to use it as a threat for narrators who didn’t do what he wanted.

As long as I narrated once every month, the device wouldn’t shut down. Even the worst Rogue rumor didn’t compare to condemning my characters to limbo.

Vince nodded, convinced he had my cooperation. “Devin, what’s your opinion? Who should help Junior?”

Devin didn’t even glance at the other three Guardians. “Jim will help.”

Jim withered in his chair. "What?" The look on his face added another twist in my stomach. I already felt skittish with the Rogue in my story; I needed a Guardian who felt more confident. Why couldn't Grace help?

Devin looked surprised at Jim's reaction. "What do you mean 'what'?"

"No." Jim gathered papers into a folder as if he was going to leave. "No," he repeated as though we didn't hear the first time. "This is not a good idea."

"Jim, you'll do fine," Grace said.

"You and Devin have dealt with the Rogue before," Vince said.

Jim turned to Vince. "You've met him before." At first, I didn't understand. Then I remembered when Vince won the Chairmanship by a close election his opponent got angry, sought revenge, and was now better known as the Rogue.

"And we all know how well that went," Vince said. I heard a hint of sarcasm. Maybe Vince only understood his own.

"We all know how well it went with me, too." Jim shivered. "There's too much history. I can't."

"If you think *you* have too much history, then explain why I have all Rogue responsibilities," Devin said.

"Because you're successful at it."

I fought the urge to wave at them to remind them of my existence. What they talked about eluded me, but I didn't like the sound of it. Jim's posture stiffened as the seconds ticked on.

Grace gave him a loving look. "Take the project and put the poor girl's mind to rest, Jim. She doesn't want to hear us arguing."

Jim glanced in my direction, finally remembering I was there. "Fine." Jim's eyes darkened. "I'll take the assignment."

A muscle in my jaw twitched and my eyes narrowed. Did he call me an assignment?

"Good! It's settled." Vince rubbed his hands together. "Junior, Jim is now your Guardian buddy."

"Is that how I address him?" I didn't hide my sarcasm this time.

"Ask him any questions you have." He plowed right over my remark, and I pinched my lips together. "Hopefully we won't need another meeting like this, and we'll soon have the Rogue in prison."

"Great." I pretended to share in his enthusiasm.

“Do you have any more questions?” Vince asked.
I shook my head submissively.
“Meeting adjourned until further notice.”

CHAPTER 3

JIM STUFFED FOLDERS and his laptop into his briefcase before heading over to me. As he came closer, I noticed a small scar on his upper lip. I stood up as tall as I could, but Jim still towered over me. He had to be six feet, if not more.

"Hello." There was no fluctuation in his voice.

"Hi." I tried and failed to make up for his lack of enthusiasm.

Jim handed me a business card. "This is my phone number. Write yours here." He pulled a small notebook and pen from his suit coat pocket, where I scribbled my phone number. It disappeared from my hand as he swiped it and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"I expect reports every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Continue your narration. I'll monitor your story in my office, but I can't be there every time you narrate. If you have any questions, you have my number." He was already halfway out the door.

I grabbed his coat sleeve. "Wait! What do you want in your reports?"

He glowered at the door, but the rest of him tried to look civil. "Everything. Keep me updated on how the story follows your original outline."

"It's already messed up. A boy I didn't create started talking to my main character."

Jim's lips pressed tighter together. "I'll look into it. I'll also alert Dr. Webb's secretary to set up an appointment."

I let go of his sleeve. "Who's Dr. Webb?"

"She's a therapist trained to help patients cope from negative experiences with the narration device."

"I don't need a therapist. I'm fine."

He broke his gaze from the door and met my eyes. "And we want you to stay that way."

Was it common to start people off with a therapist as soon as the Rogue entered their stories? My teeth started gnawing on my bottom lip.

Jim started for the door again but paused, rubbed his forehead, and then turned around. "One more thing. Check with me before you do anything stupid."

This had to be the worst meeting I'd ever attended. I folded my arms tightly across my chest. "I don't do stupid things in my stories."

At least he noticed my defensive position. "I don't doubt you. However, I've read a few of the infiltrated manuscripts, and there comes a point when, in desperation, the narrator did stupid things."

I unfolded my arms and let them hang loose at my sides, but my hands remained balled into fists. "Maybe they did stupid things because their 'Guardian buddy' was too busy trying to get out of the assignment."

Jim gave me a look I didn't understand. When he opened his mouth, I anticipated an apology, but his phone buzzed in his pocket. His mouth closed as he pulled it out, looked at it, and waved me away. "I have to take this. Get back to narrating. Let us do the rest." He left the room, phone to his ear.

Jerk!

"Are you alright, dear?"

I spun around to see Grace standing behind me, looking concerned. "Why does it seem like Jim doesn't want to help me?" I asked.

"He's been through a lot these past few years. The stress makes him prickly. The Chairman too, come to think of it. I'm afraid our first impression hasn't been the best."

My fingers found the sleeve of my cardigan as I played with the hem. "I didn't give the best first impression either. I'm just..." My mood couldn't adequately be described, so I went to my default reaction of smiling.

"These boys have been in the trenches with the Rogue for so long they forget a little compassion goes a long way. You'll see, Junior. They may seem prickly now, but they'll sacrifice everything for your safety. They were elected Guardians for a reason."

The tension in my body relaxed at Grace's words. No wonder she was a poet. "Why couldn't you help me?"

Grace gave me a side hug. "You'll find out soon enough, dear. Protecting a narrator takes someone more young and fit."

The air escaped my lungs as I remembered my situation. "How bad will it get?"

Grace's smile faltered before it came back less sincere. "Not as bad as some, I'm sure."

The secretary got a cab for me under Grace's direction. I insisted my apartment wasn't far, but she wouldn't hear of it. What Grace said haunted me. Was I in for a tough time? Could I trust Jim to help if it became hard? I thought about Jim all the way home. I tried to believe he'd sacrifice everything to keep me safe, but he admitted he had made mistakes—mistakes which caused serious problems.

The chair in my office squeaked as I collapsed into it. I scowled at the computers, the screens still frozen in time. Reggie wore his creepy grin, and Bree looked innocent but confused. My attention again turned to the device.

My line of sight traveled back to Reggie, and my thoughts turned to the Rogue. He broke many narration laws, and if he wasn't stopped my characters would be in danger. How was I supposed to fight a guy who wouldn't follow the rules? Could I skirt around the rules without putting myself or my characters in danger?

Laws were vital for the narration device. The device was revolutionary and extremely dangerous. In the early days, anyone could order a device and narrate stories. A group of five scientists wanted to test the limits. The experiment ended after three days—four of them died, and the fifth ended up in a coma. Distribution was shut down and didn't open again without the Guardians in place. The rules and regulations became so strict that a person had to graduate from college with a degree in Narration before they could even touch a device. Even then, the Guardians came out with fresh rules every few months. The device was powerful, almost too powerful, and I agreed with the laws. If it wasn't for the public outcry all those years ago demanding laws so they could keep using the narration device, it would have been destroyed, and no one else would have been able to use it. The laws protected us and helped us use an amazing device. So how was I supposed to fight the Rogue?

I clamped the headphones over my ears and adjusted the microphone close to my mouth. One of my other characters needed to become co-main character so the Rogue wouldn't focus all his attention on Bree. It'd make my story more complex than I anticipated, but what choice did I have? If I wanted to protect Bree, the other character needed to be an adult. It

might be confusing to have an adult main character in a story about teenagers, but I had to make it work.

My first thought was Bree's mom, but I felt uneasy. She was older, but they were mother and daughter. Even without the Rogue putting them in danger, my original outline had them going through a lot. No, I couldn't give this responsibility to Bree's mom. I needed someone else, and I didn't have much of a choice. It had to be Allen.

This kind of responsibility on Allen was a gamble. He was a good man, but his soul was still fragile. If the Rogue got to Allen, it could destroy him. I massaged my forehead. As much as I hated Allen being co-main character, Bree's mother would be worse.

I pulled out a notebook and jotted down a rough outline for the next scene. An unplanned scene was difficult to narrate. The story could be thrown off if I wasn't careful. If I narrated in short bursts throughout the coming week, it should be okay.

Allen's office popped up on one of the screens. I double-checked everything. The device knew about Allen's character, but I wanted to make sure it didn't miss anything, down to the titles of the books on the three bookshelves inside his office. When I was satisfied, I situated the microphone again before I took a deep breath.

"Resume."

§ § §

Allen Simmons leaned back in his office chair reading the material for his class the next day. It was almost five o'clock on a Monday. From his window, he saw a small, back alley path to the library. It seemed a fitting view for an English professor. After a time, he found a new perk to his office view.

The math building was across the lawn from the English building. The door of the math building opened. He peeked over the top of his book and watched as Sadie stepped out of the building. She secured her red coat around her as she braved the winter storm.

Tomorrow marked the three-week anniversary since he bumped into her, a holiday only he celebrated in his quiet office. Allen knew this woman was different. It had been years since he felt a connection with a woman from a simple greeting. A casual bump into each other turned into an hour-long

conversation at the coffee shop on campus. Now she reduced him to a lovesick teenager, waiting to catch glimpses of her from a distance and quietly celebrating the days since she came into his life.

The more practical, professor side of him shook his head, disgusted. The professor side of his brain wanted to beat some logic into the lovesick teenager and not rely so much on emotion. The final piece of his mind, the previously married side, wanted to remind him how relationships could hurt, and hurt deep. The three imaginary figures were in a constant state of war since he bumped into Sadie. The lovesick teenager demanded he march down and ask her on a proper date. The previously married side reminded him there were years of dust on that set of skills he needed to brush off. The professor nagged at him to keep studying for his lesson tomorrow and worry about Sadie another day.

Allen dug his fingers into his forehead and massaged his head until his fingers got tangled into his light brown hair. Why did love have to be so stubborn? He opened his green eyes and rested them on the lesson plan he had forgotten about the moment Sadie walked out of the math hall.

Someone knocked, and Allen expected it to be a student. He opened the door and instead saw a pile of boxes.

“Sorry,” the distressed man behind the boxes said. “Could you point me to office 301 N?”

“301 N? We’re office neighbors. I’m 301 M. Here, let me take some of those for you.”

“Thanks.”

Allen took a few bulky boxes, uncovering a man a head shorter than him. The man’s black hair was short and receded a bit, and he had dark brown eyes that looked almost black compared to his pale skin. While the man unlocked the office next to him, Allen found himself with all the boxes. He struggled with the added weight, but didn’t want to show it.

“I’m Riley Nelson, by the way. Visiting Faculty.”

“Allen Simmons.” Riley opened the door, and Allen unloaded his armful of boxes on an empty desk.

“Thanks for your help,” Riley said.

“Yeah.” Allen shook Riley’s hand. Riley quickly dropped his hand, moved to the desk, and started opening the boxes. Allen headed toward the door. “If you have any questions, let me know.”

“I do have one, yes. Who is she?”

Allen walked over to the window, and every muscle in his face stiffened when he saw Sadie walk back into the math building. She must have forgotten something.

“Who?” Allen wanted to make sure Riley meant Sadie.

“The woman in the red coat walking into the building.”

“Her name is Sadie. She’s in the math department.” The lovesick teenager gasped at the audacity of uttering her name to another man.

“Sadie.”

Allen bristled, but tried to keep his face neutral. He did not like the way her name sounded coming from Riley. The lovesick teenager almost strangled the professor side for giving more information. The professor told the lovesick teenager he was being polite. The previously married part of him remained quiet in the corner.

“Well, someone’s got to teach it. Am I right?” Riley had a light and humorous tone to his voice. Allen did not find it funny. “Any idea if she’s single?”

“I don’t think so.” The lovesick teenager said that bit. Before he felt too embarrassed for lying, he turned around and headed out the door.

“Thanks for your help, Allen.”

Allen didn’t answer as he returned to his office and opened a book, reading a couple of passages he planned to use in his class. Reading calmed his nerves, though most of what he read sailed over him.

It was three minutes past five before he realized what time it was. He snatched his coat and shoved his arms through the sleeves. Spring would never come with how much snow had fallen today. Even though February was the shortest month, it always seemed to last so long. Winter had a firm, icy grip over everything.

The last button on his coat slid into place right as he pushed open the door. The scene before him froze his heart more than the bitter wind did. Riley was talking with Sadie. The look on her face revealed a mild discomfort as she answered a question Allen didn’t hear. She was so pretty. Not too thin, short black hair, and beautiful brown eyes. The smile on her face was so warm it melted the coldness around his heart, until he realized she was looking straight at him. His heart sputtered as he tried to smile back, but he didn’t know if the muscles in his mouth obeyed. This time his mind panicked. Sadie was smiling at him, and he needed to smile back now so she wouldn’t think

he was ignoring her. All the heat in his body rose to his cheeks as his mouth made a semblance of a smile he hoped wasn't creepy.

Why was love so self-destructive? He turned and lumbered down the path leading to his car. The professor stuffed all self-deprecating thoughts in a box and demanded he think of tomorrow's lesson. It was the safest place for his mind to go.

CHAPTER 4

MY FOREHEAD WAS inches from the screen as I stared at Allen frozen in the process of walking away. Allen's introduction scene seemed short, but it took a whole week to narrate. I kept stopping to contemplate how to best get his character across. This man was dear to me, and I wanted to nail his introduction.

When the Rogue's character entered, I stopped the narration during the middle of a conversation and waited a day. My logic was the Rogue could only narrate when I narrated, so if the Rogue wasn't at his device, I could get his character away from Allen. I chose a late time of night to start narrating again, but the Rogue must have had an alarm on his device or something to alert him, because his character responded as soon as I started up again.

My cell phone rang, which made me jump. I grabbed it and saw Jim was calling me. "Hello!" I overplayed the enthusiasm so he wouldn't notice my annoyance.

"Why is Allen a co-main character? You're not following my instructions."

"Wow. Really? Crushing my work before giving it a chance?" If Jim wouldn't pretend to be civil, then neither would I. It took Jim a week to notice I introduced Allen as a co-main character. Why did it take a week?

"You promised to talk to me before you did anything stupid."

My cheeks burned. "You think what I'm doing is stupid?"

"At best it's an unwise decision. You are not following your outline and rough draft."

"Let me get this straight." My blood started to boil. "You want me to tell you every little decision I'm going to make?"

"Yes," was Jim's quick reply. "If it's not in your original outline."

I held my breath to keep from screaming then slowly let it out. "Fine." My voice was flat. "Sorry." I meant the exact opposite. Did he realize what

it meant? Eventually my story would be nothing like the original outline. Soon I'd have to call every time I started the device.

"Why did Allen become a co-main character?" Jim asked.

"I don't want them focusing on Bree, so she and Allen will share the load. Allen can protect Bree if things go south." Jim took a breath to start talking, but I didn't want to hear him. "These are my characters. It may not mean much to some narrators, but I'm protective of mine."

"Okay, okay." Jim sounded exasperated. "Calm down, Junior. I realize you might be a little on edge."

"A little?" I couldn't believe what came out of his mouth. "A little?"

There was silence on the other end. I tapped the edge of my desk to keep my temper in check. The sun came from behind the early summer clouds, warming my office and adding more heat.

"The stress is getting to you. You might need a few days away from the device," Jim finally said.

"I can't."

"Your characters are fine in the frozen state. They can't do anything without you narrating."

"This is important. I need to solve it." My voice sounded panicky. I stopped tapping the desk and began to pace around my small office.

"The Guardians have worked on this for three years. Do you think you'll solve it in a week?"

I glared at the wall. Part of me wanted to like Jim. He was, after all, in charge of my welfare. "I deserve to know what happens to stories when the Rogue enters them."

Jim responded too quickly. "You've heard the rumors."

"I need more than rumors. What's the Rogue's battle plan, the things he did in previous stories? This isn't a story anymore, it's war."

The sigh I heard on the other end didn't sound exasperated—more like Jim dreaded answering my question. "There's a reason the public doesn't know the truth."

"I'm different from the public now."

"It will freak you out because you're going through it."

I shook my head as I paced faster. "Don't protect me, Jim. Tell me."

He breathed in and out. "It's not my place to decide whether I can tell you." Jim sounded less angry. "But I will ask Vince."

I used my other hand and tried to hug myself. "Do you have any suggestions of what I should do next?" The phrase took a blow to my pride on its way out. Why did I have to go to him for ideas?

"Technically, he hasn't done anything yet, so we can't either."

"He's placing *his* characters in strategic places throughout *my* story." I didn't bother hiding my sarcasm. "That's all."

"Junior, it's fine."

A flood of anger rushed to my brain. "I have to get back to narrating."

"You have an appointment with Dr. Webb next Monday at one."

"I don't need a therapist."

"Dr. Webb can help you with your anger. Take a break for a couple of hours. When you get back, follow your original outline."

I glared at the phone, disgusted. He was supposed to help, not treat me like this. "Fine, Guardian buddy."

Jim hung up without saying goodbye. I pushed the phone far away right as my stomach rumbled. Much to my horror, Jim was right. I needed a break. My phone went off again. For a wild moment, I thought Jim called back to apologize. Nope. Different number.

"Junior! Hello! How are things going?" Devin asked.

"Devin?" I groaned for my answer.

"That doesn't sound promising," he said. Before I chickened out, I told him my whole conversation with Jim.

"Don't be hard on him. This is his first time dealing with the Rogue since..." Devin trailed off. "It's not my place to tell." Devin seemed like a guy who wouldn't tell other people's secrets, but it still made me curious. "I'll chat with Jim and sort things out. By the time this is done, you and Jim will be great friends."

A laugh had no trouble escaping me. "Maybe if he wasn't so bossy."

"Jim copes with stress by becoming a control freak. It's something I've noticed as we've worked together, though I don't condone his actions. He's a pleasant fellow when he's not stressed. I'll talk with him."

I sank into my chair and rubbed my forehead. "Thanks. I'll get back to narrating."

"Good luck."

I hung up and placed the headphones back over my ears, ignoring my stomach for a bit longer.

§ § §

Bree sat down at the neon red cafeteria table and unwrapped the cellophane from the school's salad. With a decision between a hamburger, pizza, or mashed potatoes and gravy, she felt safest with a salad. Not because it was healthier, but because she had lower expectations of what it should taste like.

Holly slammed her tray on the table. Bree jumped and squeezed ranch all over her tray instead of the salad. "Holly, what—"

"I'm done." She sat down with a huff. "Done!"

"Done with what?"

"Have you seen them?" Holly used her spork to point at another table across the cafeteria where Aubrielle and the senior football quarterback were making out.

"Wow," was all Bree could say. "They've...they've gone pretty fast since the party."

Holly sat down and looked at the couple again before facing forward with a sad puppy dog face. "That could have been me."

Bree glanced again at the couple and saw the sheen of slobber on them, even from across the cafeteria. She suppressed a gagging noise and instead patted Holly's hand. "I'm sure the Stud will grow tired of her and move on."

"No wonder they nicknamed him Stud." Holly clearly wasn't listening. "Hot men are my Achilles ankle."

Instead of chortling, Bree said, "Heel."

The sad puppy face barely registered confusion. "Huh?"

"Heel. The phrase is Achilles heel."

Holly shook her head, stabbed her yellow newspaper-colored potatoes, and mixed them into the lumpy gray gravy. Bree watched them pool together, and her stomach started to churn.

"Disgusting," Bree said.

"I know." Holly looked behind her again. "Ugh. They're all over each other."

Bree reached out and grabbed Holly's wrist. "You're going to break your spork, and I'm losing my appetite."

The physical touch must have jolted Holly to the present, because she finally noticed the liquid mass on her plate. Grumbling, she threw her spork down. "I'm sorry."

“Hey, it’s okay.” Bree attempted to scoop the ranch back onto her salad. “A lot happened since the party this weekend.”

Holly looked at her mush. “She had no right to sell us out. I thought we were friends. Crazy what people will do for the attention of a boy.”

Bree nodded, glancing over at Aubrielle and Stud before she grimaced and returned to her ranch. “Karma is on our side.”

A frown creased Holly’s face as she watched Bree continue to clean up her ranch. “Are you not mad at all?”

“Of course! Aubrielle broke our best friend confidentiality agreement and spilled your secrets. I’m livid!”

“Stupid sleepovers.” Holly rubbed her head. “They make me such a blabbermouth.”

“What’s wrong with being a blabbermouth?” a new voice said. Bree and Holly whipped around to see Reggie with his lunch tray. Holly turned bright red and forgot how to speak.

“Nothing,” Bree said for her friend.

“Can I sit here?” he asked. Holly moved her mouth, but nothing came out. “I’ll take that as a yes.” He sat down with a smirk in Bree’s direction.

“Reggie is in my biology class,” Holly blurted out. Her face deepened to a maroon color.

“Are you taking biology, Bree?” Reggie asked.

“I took it last semester.”

“Too bad. It would have been fun to all have a class together.”

The silence between the three of them gave Bree a sick feeling. “Well, I think I better go. Nice seeing you again, Reggie.” Bree grabbed her tray and dumped her untouched salad before leaving the cafeteria. Her eyebrows furrowed in thought. Instincts screamed at her to be as far away from him as possible. But why? Other than her gut feeling, nothing else seemed wrong with him.

Reggie had scooted closer to Holly, and she smiled at him. Bree hadn’t seen a smile on her for a few days, since the party when Stud took notice of her. It was right before Aubrielle, far more subtle and flirtatious, took Stud away. She wanted to check on Holly but didn’t. She had nothing to go by. Besides, when Reggie looked at Holly, Bree didn’t feel uncomfortable. It was only when he looked at her.

The lunch hour opened up for Bree, and she had no idea what to do with

The Altered Manuscript

it. A group of girls passed, many of them whispering about Holly. Bree overheard them talking about how Holly boy-hopped from Stud to the new kid. It put a knot in Bree's stomach.

CHAPTER 5

DO YOU NOT talk to other people, or am I an exception?" Dr. Webb asked.

I sat in a way too comfortable chair, wearing out the armrest by tracing a circle over and over with my finger. My lips twitched in a smile. Dr. Webb seemed like a nice lady. She had dark hair with a few grays intermingled. A notebook was poised in front of her, a pen resting on the pages, though her hands were clasped together, not reaching for the pen.

"I've never had a therapist before. It feels weird," I admitted.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of." I bit my lip in response and looked away. "How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Good." Dr. Webb cocked an eyebrow. I spoke too quickly and felt heat creep to my face. "I know, lying to a therapist is pointless."

"A therapist is not a mind reader." She picked up her pen and wrote a note. "But I did know you were lying."

I felt more relaxed. Even though she made it a joke, I still couldn't help but think she could read my mind. My emotions played across my face like a book, and Dr. Webb's profession was all about reading people.

She looked at me again. "I was one of the first to study the impact of what the narration device could do to a person. I'm well-trained to help."

I didn't want to look her in the eye, so I studied her office instead. It was on the second floor of a twenty-story building in the central part of the city. The Guardians' headquarters were in a quieter part. Dr. Webb had a single bookshelf full of psychology books behind her desk. A few fake trees were scattered around the room, though a real plant sat on her desk because it looked dead.

"Still don't want to talk?" Dr. Webb asked.

"I don't know what to talk about. I feel like I'm okay."

Dr. Webb wrote something down. "I need to know something about you. How do you view your characters?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Some narrators view them like rats in a lab. Others are detached from their characters because of what they have planned for them. Others treat them like family members. Since science has no evidence your characters are equal to you or me, I cannot give advice on how you treat your characters. I simply accept how you view them and move on."

I swallowed. "My characters are more than family. They are my creations. I feel protective of them, like a mother hen."

Dr. Webb nodded. "I understand."

"I've calculated every trial and test they'll go through to help them improve. The Rogue is messing everything up. He could seriously hurt my characters."

Dr. Webb smiled. "All I needed was to hit upon the right topic to get you to talk."

The comfy chair called to me, and I leaned back. I knew the debates she meant about characters. Many of my college classes continued those discussions. It came down to my own principles and beliefs. These characters were mine. Even without the narration device, I felt a sense of protection and love when they were figments of my imagination. Because the device helped me give them a physical form, my devotion deepened.

"Let me make you aware of some things." Dr. Webb's voice brought me out of my reverie. "You are a strong woman, but the Rogue can overpower you if you don't take care of yourself physically. This means eating when you should and getting adequate sleep. This sounding familiar?"

My stomach rumbled as I nodded. Hopefully Dr. Webb didn't hear.

"Write down what you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and we'll review it at our next session. Find another activity not related to narration to give yourself a mental break."

"It's difficult for me to focus on other things when my characters are in trouble."

Dr. Webb nodded. "I understand, but sometimes it's good to break away from narration so you can return with a fresh perspective."

"It would help if I didn't have to do everything."

A frown appeared on Dr. Webb's face. "What do you mean?"

"I feel like the Guardians don't care."

Dr. Webb opened her mouth to say something and then closed it

again. She looked genuinely surprised. "I work for the Guardians. Sure, they can be intimidating, but Devin is excellent at what he does. You're in good hands."

"Devin passed me off to Jim."

The surprise turned to astonishment. "Oh, he did?" She looked at the ceiling, the frown still on her face. "That's unusual."

"Devin's too busy catching the Rogue."

"It's a good sign, right? It means he's getting closer."

I folded my arms and looked out the window. "Or he's behind on his other assignments."

There was silence as Dr. Webb blinked a few times before fiddling with the notebook on her lap. "Get to know Jim. It will put your mind at ease. He's the youngest Guardian ever, which comes with an impressive resume. Devin has done a lot with the Rogue, but Jim is a great substitute."

I gave one last calculating look towards Dr. Webb before nodding. "I'll try."

§ § §

A week after my visit with Dr. Webb, I sat on the couch and stared at the ceiling. I tried hard not to feel anything. On my computer sat less than ten pages of my story. I narrated the last segment a week and a half ago. The worst case of writer's block ever.

Indecisiveness about whether to follow my original outline drove my lack of desire to pick up the headset. The clincher came because of my overactive imagination. One thought of Bree or Allen getting hurt sent my wildest fantasies playing out worst case scenarios, which made me want to narrate less.

If I could force Holly not to have a crush on the Rogue's character I would, but it was impossible. Holly was boy crazy. While hacking into my device to put his characters into my story, the Rogue saw my characters' profiles. He figured out what Holly liked in a boy. Even Bree picked up how Reggie was *everything* Holly physically loved about boys. If Holly wanted to change, she would have to decide for herself.

My phone made a sad ding as I lost my twelfth card game. I started another game without much reaction when Jim called again. He was in

the habit of calling every hour, which started to grate on my nerves. Dr. Webb suggested I get to know him, but she did only suggest it.

I didn't do any narrating for the past week and a half, so I didn't give Jim any reports. He owned a portable screen which let him watch my narration, or the lack of it. Whatever he wanted to talk about couldn't be good.

The phone stopped ringing. It gave me enough time to calculate my next move before Jim started calling again. With a long groan, I answered the phone.

"Hullo?" I relayed through my voice how much I didn't want to talk to him.

"Hello, this is Jim from the Guardians."

My fingers rubbed the bridge of my nose. "I know."

"I want to inform you Devin is not happy."

"With you or with me?"

Jim cleared his throat, his way of relaying how much he didn't appreciate my answer. "Are you going to narrate today?"

"No. I don't feel like it."

"You have two and a half weeks before your characters enter limbo."

"And a few days before then, I'll narrate." I straightened my shoulders, proud of how resolved I sounded. My smile widened the longer the silence lasted.

"Devin gave me permission to do whatever necessary to get you narrating again."

"Are these tactics illegal?"

"I didn't reach Guardianship by breaking rules, Junior." He did seem like the guy who loved rules. "You will come to headquarters, and we'll have a chat." It sounded like a threat.

A chuckle threatened to burst out of me, but I stared at the wall in confusion instead. "That's your plan?"

"I've been given permission to answer many of your questions." It sounded tempting, but I also felt annoyed it took Jim so long to get permission. "I'll meet you here in fifteen minutes. If you take a cab, I will reimburse you."

The chuckle broke free as I leaned against the couch. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll come and pick you up." The silence lasted long enough for him to add more, but nope. That was his threat.

"I expected something more intimidating from a mystery writer."

"I'll see you in fifteen minutes." He and Vince were masters at ignoring my snarky remarks.

He hung up before I unloaded the things on my mind. I whispered curses as my fists clenched. Everyone who knew Jim spoke so highly of him—Vince, Dr. Webb, Devin, even Grace. Did they see what I saw?

My phone returned to the card game. I started playing again to push Jim's resolve. Two minutes into the game I realized the full implication. If Jim came to get me, and my suspicions told me he would, I might go to headquarters in sweat pants and my comfortable plaid, button up shirt I wore exclusively in my apartment. I moaned, tossing my phone on the couch, and headed to my room to get dressed. At least my hair was fixed. It was always half the battle.

Fifteen minutes later I walked out of the taxi and into headquarters. Once again, I passed over my ID. "I'm here to see Jim."

The secretary scanned my ID and tried contacting him. "I believe Devin wanted to talk to him. I'll take you to his office and let him know you've arrived."

"Thank you."

We walked down the hall and up a set of stairs to the second floor. Though intimidating at first sight, the building was small compared to other buildings in the city, with two floors and a basement. On the way to Jim's office, I saw the door ajar to Devin's office. Jim must have been there, because no one answered when the secretary knocked on Jim's office door. After a pause, she opened the door and ushered me inside.

"Wait here until he returns."

I thanked her again and waited until she was back at her desk downstairs. It was rude, but I had to hear Jim and Devin's conversation. They still might refuse to answer my questions. As soon as I got close to Devin's office, I heard his voice.

"...is as frightened as you are."

"I'm not afraid of the Rogue," Jim said. The desk faced the door, so I didn't peek inside in case they caught me.

"Frankly, Jim, you're obnoxious toward everyone now. The Guardians know you act like this when you have too much on your plate. Junior deserves to know your pleasant personality, too."

My back pressed against the wall, and I started to feel guilty. This sounded more private. Did I think everyone talked about me and my problems in this building?

“You enlisted me to do this. This is how I fulfill assignments.”

“You need the Guardians as much as Junior does. It’s your assignment, but we can help. It’s how I got through the Rogue problems I faced.”

Silence permeated the room before Jim let out a breath. “How bad will it get for Junior?” There was the smallest catch in his voice. My eyes widened a bit.

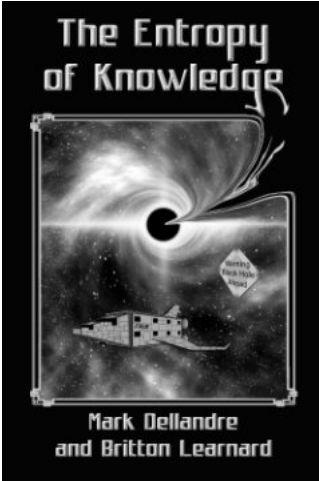
“It’s hard to predict. Though there might come a time when Junior’s life will depend on you. She needs to be able to trust you.”

My lips clamped together to stifle the gasp inside me as I backed away from the door. Their conversation didn’t include the questions I wanted answers to. If I listened any more, I’d freak myself out.

Yes, characters got in trouble, but I forgot about the danger for the narrators. The three unsuccessful narrators disappeared without a trace. It was still a small possibility, as possible as Bree dying, but something I needed to consider. I could disappear and not be heard from again.

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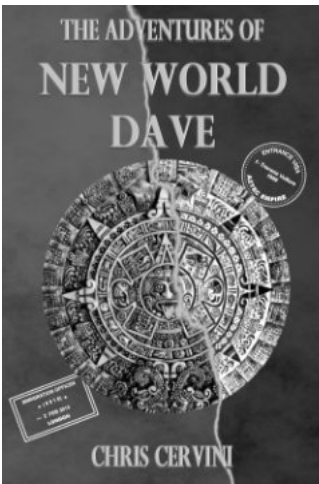


The Entropy of Knowledge

Mark Dellandre and Britton Learnard

We've all had moments when we felt like we were surrounded by idiots... Babylon Briggs feels that pain every day because his town, his planet, even his galaxy, is jam-packed with the most thick-headed simpletons imaginable. When his home world is invaded by a group of equally clueless conquerors, it's up to Babylon to save the day. The only question:

Is he smart enough?



The Adventures of New World Dave

Chris Cervini

In the spring of 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived at the shores of Mexico to conquer the Aztec Empire and claim its gold for Spain. That's what the history books tell us. But sometimes, right in the middle of the history we know, somebody goes and does something to change one important detail, and the world is never the same...

“Stop!”

I didn't mean to scream. The microphone could pick up the word even if I whispered. My hands trembled as I took off the headset, staring at the two computer screens on my desk. One screen held the text, while the other played out the scene, now frozen in time. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. The boy named Reggie still sat there, watching Bree too close. He didn't belong. I didn't create him.

My legs trembled as I backed away from the two screens. A million nasty possibilities raced through my mind until I forced myself to stop. I worked hard to get the narration device. I did the research to prove I wasn't a target. It was all in vain. The Rogue Narrator had entered my story.

The accidental discovery of the narration device while scientists were researching virtual reality completely changed the entertainment industry. An author could narrate a story, and the finished project would produce a book, an audio-book, and rough footage for a movie which faithfully followed every word of the original story. In the early days, anyone could order a device and narrate stories, until a group of five scientists wanted to test the limits of the device. The experiment ended after three days—four of the scientists died, and the fifth ended up in a coma. Distribution of the device was shut down and didn't open again without strict laws in place.

Bree does not know she's the main character in a story, and Junior, her narrator, is bound by law to keep it that way. However, when a rogue narrator hacks into the system and begins creating chaos in Junior's story, she is faced with an impossible problem: does she continue to follow the strict laws to keep herself safe, or does she risk it all to protect the characters she loves?



About the Author: Ellen Taylor lives in northern Utah with her husband and three boys. She writes in her spare time, because sometimes she needs to be in control of chaos. She is the author of *Musical Land*, which you can find on royalroad.com, and the co-author of *Give Me Back My Children*.



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