

MAGE ACCESSION

Christopher George

Mage Accession 1st Edition

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my good friend Ian Seet, who passed away in 2015. Too soon you were taken, my friend. A more gentle and kind soul I have never met.
Rest easy, my brother. You will be missed.

Ian Seet 1978-2015

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Accession

ək'sɛʃ(ə)n/

- the attainment or acquisition of a position of rank or power.
- a new item added to an existing collection of books, paintings, or artefacts.

PROLOGUE

I can save the ones that I care for - it's strange how easily we believe the lies we tell ourselves. It's only the little lies that we distrust, analyse and take apart. The big lies slide so easily down our throats that we can't tell them from truth. And so I tell myself again, I can save the ones I care for.

My name is Devon Wills and I am nothing more than a liar. You cannot save the ones you love. No matter how hard you try, power alone is not enough. I have turned myself into something I swore I would not become in an effort to save that which I had already lost. It wasn't a choice that I made consciously, and therefore I would do it again. I had no choice - it was a matter of fate. Once again I have become ensnared by the lies I tell myself - I had a choice, of course I had a choice. It was my decision to kill Vin rather than allow

him to kill me. I am nothing but the product of my choices. I do not regret these choices - I killed Vin to save my own life. We had attempted to kill each other; he failed, and I succeeded. I do not think he would begrudge me my victory. He was a broken thing, built by broken people in a world filled with broken promises. I almost pity him, but then I've become exactly like him.

I make no apologies for my actions, I could claim self-defence or extenuating circumstances, but I knew it for what it was. It was murder. I could have left him alive, I chose not to. I had the choice and I chose to kill him, as I have killed many, many more since. I do not take pride in this claim; I killed those I had to, those who would have done harm to me and those I care for, but the truth is in the end, it doesn't matter. I can't save those I love. I am reminded once again of this fact as I stand amongst the burning buildings of my home. I watch as it burns and again I tell myself that I can protect the ones I love. Lies.

Ash stings my face as it falls from the sky like rain. The smoke catches in my throat as I glance around what remains of my home. This is my fault. I caused this destruction and I would do it again in a heartbeat. I watch my home die through a disruptive shield and I feel nothing. I have allowed myself to become numb. I cannot even remember the last time I felt the rush of air against exposed skin. It is possible I have had my shield raised for weeks without a break. I can't remember. I'm so very tired. I look around at the devastation I've wrought at the broken bodies of those who stood against me. I ended their existence quickly; I owed them that much compassion. They were no threat to me, I

barely winced as their bullets impacted my shield. I barely feel it anymore. With a casual flick of my wrist I ended them, sending them hurtling from the side of the building. I did not listen to their screams or entreats for mercy. I have become numb – this is not who I should be. All my power, all my strength, and I am helpless to save those I love most. If the situation weren't so dire I would find the irony amusing – there is a lesson to be learned here, I am sure of it, but I don't believe that I am meant to learn it. Our kind doesn't learn lessons. We are far too smug with our own cleverness to think that there is anything we don't already know. But one of us is about to learn a lesson today.

How did it come to this? I am sure I was not destined for this, that some horrible mistake must have been made. I am not sure if the mistake was mine or another's but I suppose in the end culpability doesn't really matter much anymore. As for myself, I was broken, I can admit that now. I didn't understand the power I possessed and I became scared of it. In my fear and weakness I made a vow that I would never use the mana again. I knew the consequences of such an oath and I knew what it would cost me, but I did it anyway. I thought that by giving up the magic I would free myself from my guilt and my pain. I had thought that I would somehow save myself by denying who the mana had made me. I tried to give up the magic and by forswearing it save myself. It's not that simple – it's never that simple.

CHAPTER ONE

I groaned as I shuddered in sleep. I was having the Dream again. I hadn't been sleeping well lately, if the term 'lately' can be applied to a six-month period. I had expected to have difficulties - after all I was aware of what not using mana did to my system. Fortunately I got over those symptoms quickly. It had only taken me two or three months of suffering. But it was worth it - things seemed to be getting better. I no longer got headaches or woke up in the middle of the night in a feverish flush.

No, what I had now was far worse – the Dream. It began the same way every time, looking into those eyes, those burning eyes. Vin visited me in my dreams each night and although he never spoke a word his eyes spoke volumes. He didn't judge me, he didn't stare at

me in hatred or vengeance... no the message in his eyes was much worse – it was one of acceptance and understanding.

“Just like me,” his eyes whispered. “Just like me!”

The eyes pierced into my very core and it felt like the dead man was tearing me to pieces and inspecting each piece, but this wasn't the worst part. Just when I thought I could bear no more, the Dream changed perspective and I would look down at myself holding the shattered wreck of a dumpster as if I am Vin. I watch as Vin builds more and more flame into its wrecked structure. I could feel Vin drawing upon his powers, I felt it in my fingers and flowing throughout my whole body. I felt the power build through my frame and watch with satisfaction as I made the flame stronger, hotter and more deadly. With delight I increased the power, pouring my wrath against the figure of myself, watching as I struggled to stand against this power, although I knew it was me that I was about to destroy. I revelled in every shudder and staggered gasp the figure made. This is the worst part: I enjoyed it. The pleasure the power brought me – the dominion over my old self. I wanted it, I wanted more, but I knew that this would not be. I knew what came next.

Vin died trying to kill me. He died feeling ecstatic in victory. Inevitably I saw the shattered wreckage of the dumpster bin move to embrace me. Like metallic arms the structure of the bin wrapped around me lovingly, its caress almost tender and gentle at first but then I felt its crushing weight wrap around me and pull me into the air. It's strange that I could feel no pain in my dream, because Vin must have suffered horribly

before his death. In my dream I could feel the heat of scorched skin and smell the odour of burned flesh, but I felt no pain. This was usually enough to bring me to consciousness with a gasp. The dreams were getting worse, more frequent. In my sleep my hands had wrapped around the bed sheets and pulled them from the mattress. I pulled my fingers away and noticed with wiry resignation that there were burn marks on the fabric. It was happening again and it's definitely getting worse.

How long will it be until I kill myself in my sleep? Setting my bed on fire and burning to death in my slumber? Perhaps this might be best, to die in my dreams with no pain. As appealing as this sounded I just didn't feel I deserved a painless death. No, I deserved to suffer for what I had done.

I sighed and got to my feet. It was 3 am and I knew from experience that I wouldn't be getting any more sleep that night.

I was staying with some old friends of my parents when they were still together. I had fled there after the fight. I couldn't have gone home, the police would have found me for sure. You don't tear up a shopping mall and then disappear into thin air, yet that was exactly what I had done. The police would definitely be pulling the city apart looking for me. I skipped out from the police only seconds before they had cordoned off the shopping centre. I was again almost caught trying to visit my friends in the hospital where they had been taken. I hadn't gotten anywhere near them. It was too dangerous – even an invisible man couldn't have gotten in there. I never got to say goodbye to my friends, but I

suppose that's for the best. I was only a danger to them now.

I had to get away from everything that I had once known. My parents' friends lived in the high country to the east of Melbourne, far enough away from my home that I hoped the police wouldn't come looking for me there. To be honest I was amazed that it had worked. I had expected at any second to be greeted by the sounds of sirens coming to bring me back in. During the first few weeks it was all I could hear when I heard a car pull up, but after several weeks of nothing I began to relax. I didn't know how, but somehow I had pulled it off. I didn't have much in the way of plans for the future - you can't really plan ahead in my position - but I was content.

The high country is beautiful and I had fond memories from my times there as a kid. I could trust the people I was staying with - I'd known them all my life. When I was growing up our two families were pretty close. They had moved to Omeo when I was in my early teens and I'd spent most of my Christmas and Easter holidays living with them. Although we weren't blood related I called them Aunt and Uncle. I didn't much like bringing my troubles down upon them but I didn't have a choice - I couldn't very well survive on my own, and going home would mean worse troubles. I suspected that my mother at least knew where I'd gone but I didn't know for sure. My aunt and uncle must have said something to her, but I hadn't spoken to her. I wasn't sure if the police had questioned her or not in relation to me. In fact I had no idea if the police were even still looking for me, but I wasn't going to take that risk. It was a good bet that they would have been able

to identify me in the security footage from the shopping mall. It wouldn't have been too hard for them to figure out who I was from my school records.

I hadn't spoken to my dad at all either, but I doubted that he'd spoken to my aunt and uncle. They had taken Mum's side in the divorce and had quite vocally broken off ties with Dad. I kind of missed him, although I was ashamed to face him. I desperately wanted his advice on all this, but I could never explain it all to him properly. He wouldn't understand. He couldn't. He was a very practical man and wouldn't accept the fact that I was a mage. I shuddered to think of his reaction when he learned his son was also a killer. No, I could never tell him.

As worried as I was about being found by the police and questioned about something I couldn't explain I was more worried that another mage would track me down as Vin had, but that hadn't happened yet either and I didn't understand why. Renee's grandfather would have been furious that I'd been caught on camera in my fight with Vin, exposing us to society. Renee had been adamant that this should never happen and I had flagrantly broken that rule when I had attacked Vin. Renee hadn't told me what the punishment was for this, but I doubted it would be lenient.

Renee. It seemed that no matter how hard I tried to block her from my mind, my train of thought inevitably led me back to her. I felt so conflicted. I missed her terribly and yet felt a deep sense of betrayal and hurt. She'd abandoned me and left me to my fate. She hadn't been abducted by Vin and he'd come after

me – just as we knew he would. She disappeared and I was forced to defend myself... I was forced to... I couldn't even say the word out loud.

“Killer,” my subconscious whispered to me treacherously.

“Shut up,” I whispered back and rolled over and tried to get back to sleep. I failed.

* * * * *

I was already awake when the rest of the household awoke. I'd already replaced my bed sheets. This was getting expensive; I'd purchased several sheets of the same style when I'd first realised that this might be a problem. I'd been throwing out the ruined ones before anyone else saw them. What else could I do? It wasn't like I could explain to my aunt about my nocturnal pyrotechnics.

My aunt and uncle owned a small cattle ranch just outside of the main stretch of town. I worked with my uncle during the days and he'd been throwing me a small salary for my efforts. That was good for two reasons: I now had some money, and I'd found that the dreams seemed to come less frequently if I went to bed exhausted. Each day I attempted to physically work myself into a state of total fatigue before bed. My uncle had commented that although I was pretty useless on the farm, at least I was eager.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” a dishevelled voice called from behind me. I turned to see my cousin Allie amble into the room. She wasn’t a morning person; her pyjamas were in disarray and her hair was a mess. This was not an unusual state of affairs for the morning.

“Good morning yourself.” I quite liked Allie, although she could be a little impish at times “And what do you have on for today?”

“Well... school, duh.” She looked at me like I was stupid.

Allie was in her early high school years, around thirteen or fourteen. She had an older brother, Sam, who had moved to Melbourne about two years ago. I used to see him from time to time when I lived there but not as much as I would have liked. We were pretty close growing up though.

“You didn’t sleep much last night,” Allie said, making herself some cereal.

“No,” I agreed.

“You never seem to sleep well,” she continued. I could tell she was genuinely concerned. “You were groaning again – I could hear you through the wall.”

“You’re a good kid.” I chuckled and tousled her hair. “I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

“It’s okay.” Allie said, pouring far too much sugar onto her cereal.

“Well, have a good day.” I grinned as I watched her bring a spoon full of cereal to her mouth. I was sure that eating that much sugar would put me into a diabetic coma.

"What are you up to today?" Allie called as I stood to leave.

"Your father still needs me to paint the stockyard."

"Well, that sounds boring!"

"Better than school!" I shot back.

"Need a hand?"

"Finish your breakfast and go to school." I grinned as I left the kitchen. I didn't feel like eating anything anyway. I'd come back later and have a big lunch. It was my routine. Other than Sunday breakfasts with Dad, I'd never really been big on breakfast.

I'd been painting the damned stockyard for about a week; it was hard work out in the middle of the main paddock. The stockyard was on a slightly raised mount in the middle of the farm. This meant I was exposed to the elements from all sides. We were having an uncharitably hot winter and I found that I was actually tanning in the sun.

Who gets a tan in winter?

My uncle emerged from the house as I was preparing the equipment I'd need for the day. He had a mug of coffee in one hand and a look of annoyance on his face.

"Devon, any chance you could drop Alisha at school this morning?" he called.

I felt a quick twinge of conscience at his request. I'd lied about having a license when he'd first asked me if I could drive Allie to school a few months back. The truth was, I'd done the test but failed and hadn't had a

chance to go back and complete the test. It was unlikely given the current circumstances that I'd ever get it now.

"Sure," I replied amicably, although to be honest I'd have preferred to go straight to work.

"Thank's Dev," he replied, going back inside.

Great, now I'd have to wait around for about an hour or so while Allie got ready. I sighed wistfully and mentally prepared for work. I'd left all my paint brushes to soak overnight so I needed to clean them up and make sure they were okay to use. I quickly checked over the brushes to ensure that they were okay. They were, but I'd need a new roller. I remembered I'd left a box in the shed. As I pulled the box from the top shelf, a sudden movement drew my attention to my arm. The Mana particles were particularly active today. I could see them frantically sliding up and down the length of my arm. Once I stopped using the Mana, the particles had shown a notable decrease in activity. They never completely disappeared from my body, but I had noticed they were less active, more sluggish. This reaction was unusual, but not noteworthy. An increase in activity happened from time to time, but I wasn't really sure what prompted it. I smiled wryly and tried to put it out of my mind. I'd gotten awfully good at ignoring them over the past few months. However, today they were making it especially hard to do so. I collected the rollers and returned the box to the shelf.

I'd finished long before Allie was ready. I patiently made myself a cup of coffee and waited for her in the kitchen.

"Lee! Come on!" I called out. "You'll be late!"

"So what?" she called back from the vicinity of the bathroom. Great, she wasn't even close to finished.

"Don't make me come in there!" I called through the door in mock threat.

"You wouldn't!" Allie called out nervously.

"Try me!"

"I'm ready anyway," she announced, walking into the kitchen. "Where's Dad?"

"He's asked me to take you to school today."

"Oh," Allie commented, her face taking on a strange expression.

"What?"

"Your driving is awful!" she complained with a smirk on her face.

"Would you prefer to walk?"

"Is that an option?" She grinned, skipping out the front door towards the car.

"Just get in the car," I grumbled as I followed her.

The Mana in my arms was still quite active as I drove Allie to school. It wasn't a long drive into the main town being only about a fifteen kilometres, but it was a windy road that hugged the sides of a mountain as it wound down into the valley. It would take me about 20 minutes to reach Omeo and from there Allie could catch the school bus that would take her to the high school in the next town.

If we missed the bus I'd have to drive her all the way and I'd lose most of my morning in the round trip. Allie was prattling on about something, but I wasn't really listening to her. My attention had been caught by

a Mana particle slowly and lazily rotating around my wrist and forearm. It was unusually bright. I hadn't seen them this active since my battle with Vin. That was worrying.

A strangled yelp brought me back to focus; through my inattention I'd strayed on to the other side of the road and there was a car driving towards us. My first instinct was to telekinetically move the oncoming car. The idea screamed through my senses. It would be so easy. All I had to do was wrap a thread around it and move it out of the way. The impulse was so strong I had to almost physically overpower myself to wrench the steering wheel to one side. We narrowly missed the oncoming car. A horn blasted as the car screamed past us.

Allie stared at me breathlessly, her fingers like claws still clasped to the dashboard.

"Still want to walk?" I murmured dryly by way of a joke and in a poor attempt to lighten the mood.

She nodded emphatically.

"Me too," I replied grimly, focusing on the road.

I couldn't let myself get distracted like that again. It was happening more often too, the impulse to use the Mana. It would come upon me suddenly. I'd be faced with some kind of problem or task and the urge to use the Mana would be almost overpowering. It would be so easy. I'd almost been caught out about a month ago when I was loading feed into the back of a truck using a trolley and a hoist. It had suddenly occurred to me that I could simply move them all with a wave of my hand. I'd managed to restrain the impulse but my uncle had caught me with my arm in the air about to do it. If

he hadn't caught me and made me aware of what I was doing I probably would have gone through with it too. I'm not sure how my uncle would have taken that – he was a fairly practical man. He didn't much approve of computers; I shudder to think what he'd have to say about Mana. He'd be worse than my father.

"I was joking before about your bad driving," Allie commented softly after several seconds of silence.

"All evidence to the contrary aside," I replied glibly, trying to make light of it.

"What?" Allie replied, her nose crinkling in confusion.

"You were right," I rephrased quickly.

"Well, yeah," she returned softly, "But you were getting better."

"Right." I grinned. "What about that head-on collision I almost caused back there?"

"Yeah... that was pretty bad, but at least you're not making me car sick anymore," Allie finished with a smile.

We missed the school bus, probably because I was driving so cautiously after my near miss, but I told Allie it was because she took so long in the bathroom. Allie simply poked her tongue out at me as we pulled from the bus stop.

"You know, you'd probably be a better driver if you slept more," Allie commented about halfway into the next leg of our journey.

"Probably," I agreed.

"Why do you sleep so badly?"

"Don't know," I replied gruffly, hoping she'd just drop the subject.

"Have you tried warm milk before you go to bed?"

"Yeah, makes me want to pee." I smirked.

"Me too!" Allie laughed.

Now that we were down from the mountain the drive was easier as the road between the two towns was much less bendy. It was actually quite a nice drive, with the rolling hills on both sides of the road. The area around here was mostly farmland with the occasional homestead. It was a beautiful country. I'd always considered myself a city boy, but I could learn to love this place.

"I'm going to be late," Allie commented, glancing at the clock on the dashboard.

"Then you shouldn't have used that second round of shampoo!" I shot back.

"Do you know ANYTHING about hair products?" Allie asked in a high pitched voice.

"Not, as such, no," I replied with a smile.

"Well, it shows!" Allie announced in a huff.

We pulled into the school's car park just as the school bell had finished ringing. I wasn't sure if it was the first bell or the second – either way Allie wasn't that late.

"Thanks, Dev!" she announced, throwing her arms around me.

"Have a good day, Lee." I chuckled, trying to extricate myself.

Allie turned to go, unhooking her seat belt and leaning towards the door, and my entire world slowed down. Allie had raised her arm and brought it up in front of me to reach across to open her door. My breath caught in my throat and my mind immediately staggered. There on Allie's arm, about halfway between her wrist and her elbow, was a Mana particle. It was faint, but it was definitely there. It was slowly working its way up past her elbow and it was growing stronger. Allie opened the door and hopped out, almost skipping across the school yard in an effort not to be late to class. I could see the Mana particle all the way as she ran across the yard.

What the hell?

What did this mean? Was Allie a mage too or was this something I was subconsciously doing?

If Allie was a mage, did that then mean she could see the particles in me? She didn't act like she was seeing anything out of the ordinary. If she wasn't a mage, then why could I see partially formed Mana particles?

The odds of her being a mage were so astronomical that it defied belief. Renee's grandfather had claimed that only one in a hundred thousand people became mages. No, this must be something I was doing – some new twisted trick thrown at me by fate to twist the knife one more time.

It was a long drive back home; I was back shortly before morning tea. My uncle glanced at me as I pulled up, obviously noting that I looked worried.

“Missed the bus,” I murmured by way of explanation for my tardiness as I began to load the truck.

He nodded but didn’t say anything more. This wasn’t an unusual event. Allie was less than punctual at the best of times.

“Best get started on those yards then,” he grunted.

It was a short drive out to the stockyards. I was quite content with this kind of work. It’s actually quite a nice life – simple tasks where I don’t have to think about each stroke, letting my mind wander away as my body takes over. I could probably learn to love this type of life – although it was a far cry from the work I’d imagined I’d be doing. I normally could let my mind drift off and let my body do what it needed to do. I’d look down at the clock in amazement and see that hours had passed – time flies when doing mindless manual labour.

Today was an exception, however; I couldn’t seem to get Allie and the Mana particle out of my mind. It was taunting me. It had to mean something. It had to have something to do with me. I was in a twisted hell of my own devising. My mind kept coming back to the same unescapable conclusion, regardless of what the actual cause was, I must be responsible. I’d have to move on before I brought more suffering to my uncle and his family. The only problem was I had no idea where to go or what to do. This wasn’t going to end well and I knew it. I had a dark sense of foreboding deep in the pit of my stomach.

The call came in shortly after lunch. Allie was sick and the school wanted us to come get her. My heart

caught in my throat as my uncle announced that it was some kind of fever. I immediately offered to go get her from school.

My uncle was in the middle of something so he gratefully accepted my offer. I was terrified and knew that this probably had something to do with the Mana particle I had seen this morning. This sickness sounded exactly like the fevers I'd had when I came into power. I'd hoped I'd be able to dismiss what I had seen this morning, that it had been a coincidence or something I was doing. Now I realised it wasn't the case. This sounded like Mana sickness.

If my last drive could have been categorised as cautious, this one could only be described as reckless. Allie would need some guidance and help through what was going to come next. I'd had Renee to guide me when I came into power; Allie had only me. The only problem was I had no idea how to help or even if I could. I had no idea what I was doing at the best of times. How could I help someone else through this?

Renee said she'd helped me when she'd attacked me with a Mana thread but that seemed like a harsh form of treatment and to be honest I didn't really want to use the Mana myself if I could help it. I knew once I started again, the cravings would return and I wouldn't be able to help myself. I'd be right back where I started. I tortured myself all the way to her school. I made plans, discarded them and then made new ones, only to discard those.

I'd never been inside Allie's school before, but the sick bay wasn't hard to find. The school nurse greeted me at the door.

“She doesn’t seem too bad,” she informed me. “She’s just running a fever and she’s a little delirious – we thought it best to send her home.”

I nodded as the nurse led me into the office. Allie was curled up under a blanket on a small bed in the corner – she looked so small and vulnerable. I couldn’t see any Mana particles, but she was mostly obscured by the blanket.

“Devon!” she mumbled as I walked in. “So shiny.” Her words were slurred a little.

“So shiny?”

Great, that cinched it. She could see the Mana in me. She was a mage. There was no doubt about it.

* * * * *

Allie was pretty out of it on the way back. I don’t know what the nurse had given her or if she had given her anything at all, but I wasn’t overly confident that medicine would actually be of any help. I’d gotten a good look at Allie when we’d driven back before. There were numerous Mana particles on her skin and they had a frantic urgency to them. They were almost jittery as they passed along the lines of her body. Her face had taken on the strangeness too and she looked at me with alien eyes; her mouth tucked into a tight grimace as she fought with the fever. Allie hadn’t said anything for the

entire journey into town. I wasn't even sure she was conscious.

I sat in the kitchen twisting myself into knots. I didn't know how but this just HAD to be my fault somehow. It was too much of coincidence for it to be anything else.

The stranger's gaze was a term I'd used for the effect where a mage's irises consume the whites of the eyes. I wasn't sure what the actual term was; all I knew was that when I was actively using magic my eyes took on the stranger's gaze as I expended Mana. I didn't like looking at myself when I was under this effect. It changed my entire face and made me look like someone I didn't recognise. I liked the look even less on Allie.

It had been a few hours since I'd dropped Allie home from school. Her father had immediately taken her to see a doctor. The doctor provided her with some medicine to reduce the fever and recommended bed rest. I hadn't seen her but I'd been told that she was comfortably asleep in her room, although her fever hadn't broken yet. I had thrown myself back into my work with my usual degree of enthusiasm, but this time it was tainted with the knowledge that I didn't want to return to the house. Eventually though, I'd have to. It's hard to paint in the dark.

I stomped through the door and sat at the kitchen table, my eyes furtively glancing towards the door that led to Allie's room.

"You look worried," my aunt noted. I jumped slightly; I hadn't realised she was behind me.

“Yeah, Allie looked pretty ill in the car,” I lied quickly, hoping that I’d covered myself. “I hope she’s going to be okay.”

“It’s just a fever, but you’re sweet to be concerned,” she said. “You can go in and see her if you like – she’s awake.”

I nodded and smiled. I wasn’t sure how I was going to handle this. The only thing I knew is that I wanted to be alone with her when I did. I didn’t want Allie talking about sparkly lights in front of my uncle and aunt – especially in relation to me. I could see my aunt glancing in my direction while preparing dinner, but fortunately her scrutiny was cut short by the arrival of my uncle.

“Her eyes look a little funny,” my uncle commented gruffly as he sat down next to me. He was trying hard to not appear worried, but I could tell he was very concerned. It was obvious from the tightness around his eyes and the fact he kept nervously rubbing his hands together.

“Yeah.” I nodded, “I noticed that in the car too.”

“Strange bloody fever,” my uncle announced as he got to his feet and stomped out to the garage. He obviously wanted to keep himself busy rather than sitting and worrying in the kitchen. I took the opportunity to go see Allie whilst her parents were busy. I had to physically force myself to open her door.

“How are you feeling, Lee?” I greeted as I pushed the door open, doing my best to keep things light. This wasn’t going to be good.

Allie looked at me with her head tilted slightly to the side. Her stranger's eyes were almost piercing into me with accusation.

"Why are there lights on you?" she asked. Her voice was still a little weak and slurry.

I didn't answer.

"I can see lights on me too." She almost giggled. "But no one else has them." She trailed off as her head hit the pillow again.

"Yeah, you and I need to have a little talk about that at some point," I replied, sitting on the edge of her bed. "But until then you can't tell anyone about the lights."

"I don't feel too good," she mumbled. I wasn't sure that she had even heard me.

"I know, it sucks." I nodded comfortingly. "But it won't last forever."

I tried desperately to figure out how long the fever had lasted when I had gone through it. It had seemed like a lifetime, but it was probably only a few weeks, maybe two? Renee had said it was something we all go through. As I tried to remember the details, Renee's words came back to me hauntingly.

"The Mana in your body will burn you up and you will die."

Renee's ghostly words hit me like a brick. I obviously hadn't died when this happened to me, but Renee had hinted that it was possible – likely even. This could kill Allie. I couldn't let that happen, but what could I do about it? I sighed ruefully and watched as Allie squirmed under her covers, her brow flushed with

fever. I placed a cool cloth against her forehead that had been left on the bedside by her mother. Allie didn't respond, her eyes had glazed over and Her head lolled to the side.

"She's pretty out of it," her mother commented from behind me suddenly. I hadn't even heard the door open. I wondered briefly how long she'd been there and what she'd heard.

"Pretty lights," Allie mumbled, gazing at me and waving her hand in front of her face. I looked around guiltily but fortunately my aunt hadn't noticed my reaction.

"She keeps talking about lights," my aunt mused as she took the cloth from me and began gently pressing it against Allie's forehead.

"Delirium," I grunted as I stood back and allowed her better access to her daughter.

"Thank you, Devon, for all your help," my aunt began, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure she'll be okay."

I felt like garbage. Allie's condition was my fault, I was sure of it. I knew it with a surety that can only be truth. I wasn't sure how it was my fault, I just knew that it was. I didn't say anything else. I simply placed my hand comfortably on top of my aunt's for a second and then turned and left the room. I had to do something. I just had no idea what. In the meantime, perhaps rest would help her. I would check on her again in the morning.

Allie wasn't any better the next morning; if anything, she was worse. The Mana particles in her

were almost sizzling as they built a frantic pace across her body. I checked in on her several times throughout the day and noted with grim fatalism that her condition didn't appear to be getting any better.

She hadn't woken up yet and almost appeared to be in some kind of coma. Her father talked about taking her to the hospital. I didn't think that would help, but didn't have any better ideas and I was starting to get desperate enough to perhaps even tell the truth. Not that I would be believed, but I was out of practical options. I needed someone who knew something about all this, the same someone who had helped me. It was a long shot and I doubted it would work. It was stupid for a hundred reasons and could backfire spectacularly, but I knew now I had no choice. Allie didn't appear to be getting any better by herself. I raced back into my room and began to rummage through my luggage. I pulled out a small bag that contained my old mobile phone. I hadn't turned it on since I'd left Melbourne.

With fumbling fingers I turned it on and quickly went to my address book. The phone vibrated in my hands several seconds later as notifications for a whole bunch of missed calls and voicemails inundated the screen. I ignored them.

I found the number I'd been looking for. The last time I'd called this number it had dialled out. I silently prayed that I got through this time. There was only one person who could help me now – Renee.

"This number is no longer in service," a crisp electronic voice informed me. I cursed softly. I hadn't really expected that to work, but it was worth a shot. What the hell was I going to do now? I turned the

phone off and threw it back into my bag. Allie was admitted into hospital later that day in a coma.

"She's still complaining about seeing lights," my uncle announced, stomping his way into the kitchen after returning from the hospital. "The doctors think it's some effect caused by the fever."

"But she seems okay, right?" I queried hesitantly. I feared the worst.

"She's awake now at least." He nodded. "She seems to be through the worst of it."

I'd have to go see her. I'd have to explain. The only problem was that I had no idea how I was going to do that. How do you explain something like this to someone? That you're not normal – that you're nothing like everyone else around you? That you're different? I remember being a teenager, wanting nothing more than to fit in, to be the same as everyone else. She'd think she was a freak.

She had to have found out about this somehow already. Hopefully she found out a little less dramatically than I had. I too had thought it was some form of sickness at first, at least until I had met Renee. This would destroy Allie and I didn't want that to happen to her. She didn't deserve this - it wasn't fair.

This was something she'd have to deal with for the rest of her life, and heaven forbid she should actually learn to use her powers. What would that do to her, being a teenager with that kind of power? I was bad enough when I was out of control and I had been eighteen at the time; I shuddered to think of what Allie might become.

Renee had argued against training me too. She had eventually relented, claiming that the power would come out regardless and that it was better to be in control. This was an intellectual argument and I was far too emotional to make the smart decision. Unfortunately I really didn't have any choice here. I argued with myself back and forward between what I wanted to do and what I should do. There was no easy answer. In the end, I resolved not to train her. In truth I couldn't anyway – I had no desire to use the Mana myself and if I was training someone I'd be forced to, wouldn't I?

I arrived at the hospital shortly before visiting hours finished. I made my way directly through to her room, firstly because it was a small hospital and secondly because I could feel where she was. The Mana in my veins led me right to her. She was propped up on some pillows watching television. She'd thrown a heavy jumper over herself that obscured her arms and hands. Her eyes widened when she noticed me enter and she let out a small strangled yelp. I could see her eyes trail the lines of Mana as they ran down my arms.

"We have to talk, kiddo," I sighed as I pulled up a seat next to her. Her eyes never left the Mana particles flowing across my arms.

"How are you feeling?" I was unsure of where to begin.

"Okay, I suppose," she returned sullenly.

"Do you mind if I take a look at your arms?"

"Why?" Allie snapped defensively. Her whole body was rigid under the blankets.

“I want to see something.”

Allie slowly pulled her hands from below the jumper and rolled up her right arm sleeve. The Mana particles on her arm were much calmer, much more relaxed. They were now lazily flowing across her flesh in a leisurely pattern. This was a good sign and far different from the last time I had seen her. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“You can see them?” Allie snapped. “What the...?”

“You’re looking much better.” I cut her off quickly, ignoring her look of anger and confusion.

“No, I don’t! I look like a freak!” Allie hissed. “No one else can see these things!”

“No, they can’t,” I agreed readily.

“And no one else has this crap all over them,” she continued, “...except you.”

Her eyes opened in shock. “You’ve got them too!” she stammered as the realisation hit her.

I simply nodded.

“What does it mean?” she queried, grasping my arm tightly. She was hurting me, but I ignored it.

“The lights – they’re real. You can take your jumper off now, by the way. It won’t make any difference, no one else will be able to see them anyway,” I informed her ruefully. “You must be cooking.”

“What’s happening to me?”

“Nothing good,” I grunted harshly. “You’re becoming something . . . different.”

I began my talk tentatively as I was still not sure how to proceed. I'd run myself through the wringer on the drive over here and had still come up with nothing - typical.

"I don't want to be different," she murmured sadly.

"No one ever does."

We sat in silence for several seconds. I could almost see her mind working it over. She was burning with questions and unfortunately we didn't really have time to get into it then.

"I promise I'll tell you everything when you get back home. Just promise me that you'll keep quiet about seeing the lights."

"Will I be okay?" she asked, her voice going up a notch.

"Yes." It was the hardest lie I've ever had to tell.

Allie was released from hospital three days later and I'd come to the inescapable conclusion that I'd have to train her. Like Renee had said, it was far better for her to be in control of her powers than not. Allie was released from hospital two days later.

* * * * *

“Okay, Devon, you promised to explain everything,” Allie demanded sullenly. “It’s already been a week!”

I had been sitting on the couch in the lounge room reading a book and fortunately Allie’s parents didn’t seem to be around to hear her outburst. I hadn’t been consciously avoiding her, but I realised quickly that this was exactly what I had done. In my unwillingness to have this conversation I’d taken to placing myself in a position where the two of us couldn’t talk freely. Allie, to her credit, hadn’t tried to push the issue with me until now, but she’d obviously run out of patience. I didn’t much blame her.

Allie had recovered from her sickness and bounced back to her usual vigour. I noticed, however, that she had taken to wearing long-sleeved shirts and baggy clothes that would minimise the amount of mana covered flesh that could be seen. I’d told her that no one else could see the mana, but she obviously didn’t believe me, or more likely she didn’t like looking at them herself. From what little mana particles I had seen though she didn’t appear to be in any danger. She was safe for now, but I knew it was only a matter of time before she might lose control again.

“Okay, Lee.” I sighed. “Sit down.”

Allie pulled up a chair across from me.

“I don’t claim to be an expert,” I warned her before I began.

“That’s okay.” Allie nodded eagerly. “Just tell me what is going on?”

Allie's eyes rose in disbelief as I explained as much as I knew. I didn't tell her everything, but I told her enough. I told her that I didn't use the Mana any longer, but I didn't tell her why. I told her about Renee and about how I went through my own sickness. I told her about how I learned to use my powers and about how important it was that no one ever learned that she could do this. I wasn't sure she completely understood the need for secrecy. She'd come to understand eventually.

"That's... unbelievable," Allie said.

"The proof is right there on the palm of your hand."

"So... how do I use it?" Allie asked. Her eyes were eager.

"I'm not sure how to begin," I murmured as I pondered it over. I couldn't just take her straight into building threads immediately, that was far too complex. She'd never be able to do that right away. She'd have to start with something more rudimentary, perhaps about controlling the flow of Mana in her body. I had learned from a copy of a document written by Renee's grandfather. It had helped me understand the basics. Unfortunately I no longer had access to it as I'd left it on my old laptop in Melbourne. Allie would never read such a document anyway. She had made her feelings on reading quite clear. I really wished I had it to go over it again; perhaps it would have some pointers on how to train other mages. It would be better than trying to make it up as I went along anyway.

"Okay... I want you to sit cross-legged with your palms in your lap."

“Like this?” Allie asked as she moved into position.

“Yeah like that, but with your palms facing up. Okay, now imagine that you’re trying to hold a pool of water in your hands.”

“Right,” Allie replied, placing her hands together and forming them into a cup.

“Good, now I want you to imagine that the Mana on your arms is flowing down into the water.”

Allie tensed up and I could see the Mana threads slowly change their direction and begin their journey back down her arm and begin to pool in the palms of her hands.

“I’m doing it! I’m doing it!” Allie cried excitedly. “They moved! Did you see that?”

Unfortunately as soon as Allie lost focus the mana reverted back into its natural pattern, but she was right, she had definitely altered the course of the mana down to her hands. Allie grinned at me as she tried again. The Mana particles on her arms were slowly making their way down to her hands and were lazily rotating around her palms in small circles.

“This is so cool!” Allie squealed delightedly.

I let Allie play around with this for the best part of an hour. She was quite competent by the end of it, able to easily direct the flow of Mana through her body at will. I turned back to my book while she practised, but I wasn’t really paying attention to it. The distraction of someone working Mana in my presence sent shivers down my spine. My body ached to summon my own Mana. I ignored the craving and returned back to my book. It was a bad book, but it was better than nothing.

“Okay, ready for something more difficult?” I sighed as I put the book down. It wasn’t working as a distraction anymore.

Allie nodded eagerly.

“All right, I want you to hold your hand out in front of you, and move the mana to your fingertips.”

Allie did as she was told and then turned to look at me expectantly. The mana was building around her fingers. You could almost see the pent up power as it surged across her fingers, jumping from fingertip to fingertip.

“Okay, now without moving your hand, I want you to reach out and grab this coin,” I instructed, pulling a dollar coin from my wallet.

“Do I get to keep the coin?” Allie smirked.

“Don’t be a brat. Okay, now reach forward as far as you can without moving your feet.” I grinned as I held the coin several inches beyond her reach. I held the coin just above her fingertips and made sure that she couldn’t reach forward to grab it.

“Okay, remember, don’t move forward,” I admonished her. Even if she leant forward, she would have a hard time reaching the coin.

“What am I supposed to be doing here?” Allie complained. “This is uncomfortable.”

“You’re supposed to be catching the coin,” I announced as I promptly dropped it. It hit the ground without any noticeable event. I quickly retrieved it.

“Try again.”

Allie gave me a bizarre look and focused back on the coin.

"You weren't ready?" I smirked. I hadn't expected her to be able to do it first time anyway. I would have been completely amazed if she had; in fact, I would have been terrified.

"I don't know what to do," she whined.

"Catch the coin," I repeated. "Let's try again."

Allie frowned at me as the coin repeatedly dropped to the ground, only to be recovered and dropped again.

"Aren't you tired of picking that thing up?" Allie grumbled as I yet again recovered the coin from the floor.

"Okay, one more try, then I'm calling it quits."

I released the coin and waited as it slowly began its descent. Allie's face screwed up in concentration and her arm muscles strained in an attempt to catch the coin. I wasn't sure if it was the threat of this being the final time we'd try this or because Allie had finally figured it out, but the Mana leapt from her fingers to make a snatch for the coin. Allie yelped as the Mana emerged from her hand and began to form a rudimentary thread. The thread unravelled almost immediately and the coin sailed unimpeded back down to the ground. She hadn't caught it, but this was definitely a good start.

"What the hell was that?" she whispered breathlessly as she stared at her hand in surprise.

"That was a Mana thread."

"What's that?" Allie immediately pressed.

“Let me know when you can catch the coin with it.” I grinned back as I tossed the coin to her. “You can keep the coin, by the way.”

When I left Allie was sitting down with her legs crossed dropping a coin into her lap trying to duplicate the Mana thread she had seen earlier. She wasn’t even close to getting a solid thread, but I was confident that she’d get it eventually.

* * * * *

“I caught the coin,” Allie announced when she approached me several days later. I hadn’t seen much of Allie over the past few days. She must have been very busy practising.

“Very good.” I nodded, a little surprised. “Can you pick it up from the ground?”

“Yep,” Allie confirmed with a smile.

“Show me.”

I’d been sitting at the kitchen table eating lunch when she’d arrived and Allie quickly placed the coin on the table in front of my plate. She raised her hand above the coin and crinkled up her face in concentration. It took almost half a minute before anything happened. I’d forgotten how slowly things happened at first. When I’d first started it had taken me a while too. She’d get quicker in time – much quicker.

Again I pondered the consequences of what I was doing here. I had no way of controlling Allie should she lose control and I didn't particularly trust that she had the maturity to determine how to act responsibly with this power. I certainly hadn't been responsible and I had been much older when I'd discovered my powers. In the end I suppose it didn't matter – it was already done. I could only hope that Allie would come through unscathed and that no one got hurt. Allie was a good kid - that had to count for something, didn't it?

A Mana thread slowly worked its way from Allie's fingers and languidly arched down to scoop up the coin. It wasn't a strong thread and most definitely wouldn't be able to lift much but it was more than enough to swiftly recover the coin and bring it floating back into Allie's outstretched hand.

"Was that good?" Allie grinned, seeking confirmation. "Did I do it right?"

I nodded briefly as I got to my feet and placed my dishes in the dishwasher. The fact that she'd succeeded immediately put me into a foul mood. I knew that eventually she'd get it, but I unconsciously felt that she'd lost something in her use of the Mana – like a piece of her childhood had been ripped away. I had kind of hoped that the whole thing would just go away. I knew it wouldn't, of course, but to be confronted by it left a bad taste in my mouth.

"What's next?" Allie asked eagerly, following me over to the dishwasher. She hadn't picked up on my poor mood.

"I don't know," I replied sourly. "Try to lift heavier objects I guess."

"Is something wrong?" Allie asked, finally picking up on my tone.

"No," I lied quickly. "Nothing is wrong. I'm just tired."

"Did I do something wrong?" Allie queried, her eyes open with concern.

"No," I reassured her. "I'm just a little worried. You're just far too young for all this."

"Didn't you tell me that your friend went through this when she was a little girl? And she turned out okay," Allie argued petulantly.

I'd told her about Renee and how she had discovered her powers in the hope that Allie would gain some comfort from it, that there were others like her. Now she was using this information against me. I still wasn't convinced that Renee had turned out okay in the end, but I wasn't in a position to argue the point.

"I'm older than she was!" Allie whined.

"You're my little cousin!" I snapped back. "This shouldn't be happening to you... and Renee had her grandfather to help her through it."

"And I've got you to help me!" Allie immediately retorted, cutting me off.

"I don't know what I'm doing!" I hissed angrily, finally losing my temper.

"You're doing all right so far," Allie stated, raising her hand to telekinetically move a plate from the sink into the dishwasher. Her anger lending her more power and speed, it happened almost immediately.

"See? I can do it!" Allie announced triumphantly.

“Don’t do that!” I snapped back. “It’s not a toy! It’s not something to play with or take lightly. Treat it seriously – it’s dangerous!”

“I know that!” Allie replied defensively, her face turning into an annoyed frown. But she didn’t. I could tell from the way she was answering that she didn’t believe me. It was the exact same response I’d had when I’d told Sarah, my friend from school. Sarah had been right to be scared of these powers. They were dangerous and I’d underestimated them and it had cost me. I wasn’t going to let the same thing happen to Allie.

“No, you don’t!” I snapped back as I stormed off. “You don’t know anything!”

I wasn’t sure who I was angrier at - myself or Allie. I wasn’t being fair on the poor girl and she certainly didn’t deserve it, but I was too angry to care. I needed to go for a walk and cool off. Allie didn’t follow me, although I could imagine that she really wanted to.

I came back several hours later and found Allie in the downstairs lounge room curled up in front of the television. She was watching some stupid sitcom show that she liked. She looked just like she used to as a little kid, a blanket tucked under her chin and a packet of chocolates on the coffee table in front of her. It hurt so much to see her in a pose that I was so familiar with, covered in Mana lines. She looked alien.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, throwing myself onto the couch.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked. I could tell now I was closer that she’d been crying.

"No, of course not. I'm mad at me." My voice caught in my throat.

"Why?"

"Because I feel like this is somehow my fault," I replied.

"That's crazy. If you weren't here I'd be totally freaking out," Allie exclaimed. "You've kept me from going crazy. I'm seeing things that no one else can see and I can do things that no one else can do." Allie leaned forward to place a hand on my shoulder. "If you weren't here I don't know what would have happened," she continued softly.

"I don't know what's going to happen to you now that it has," I replied morbidly.

"As long as you're here I don't feel like I've got anything to worry about," Allie announced, throwing a pillow at me. "Now shut up. I'm missing my show."

"Devon," Allie called as I got up to go after the show had finished. "This isn't your fault."

I didn't reply, I simply nodded and went to my room. Regardless of fault this was now very much my problem and It was only going to get worse.

* * * * *

It had been a pretty hard day at work the next day. We'd had to move several of the posts in the stock

yards. These were large posts, so it involved a lot of ditch digging and moving heavy pieces of wood. The only good side to all this drama with Allie was that I'd almost managed to completely ignore my own impulse to use the Mana. Even as we were winching several large posts into place manually, I never had that annoying unconscious impulse to use the magic. I could have done the task in three seconds flat using mana. It felt good to do it manually though; there was a real sense of accomplishment.

I'd stopped by the local pub after work – it was something that Allie's father did from time to time after a particularly hard day. In fact, he would have come in with me but had gone home about half an hour ago. I'd chosen to stay and walk home later. It was a good forty-minute walk and to be honest I was kind of looking forward to it. It was a pretty clear night and the view of the stars completely dwarfed what little of them we could see in the city. Everything seemed brighter, more distinct, less cluttered. There was probably a metaphor for city life in there somewhere if you thought about it.

The crowds in the bar had thinned out as people had gone home and there was really only me, the bartender and several patrons in one of the booths in the corner. I heard the door open behind me, but didn't really think that much of it. It wasn't until I saw the Mana rise on my arms that I came to the conclusion that something was a little off. It was probably just Allie – she must have been sent to retrieve me by my aunt. The mana was probably just reacting to Allie's presence. I'd noticed yesterday that the Mana tended to react to the presence of others of our kind. My aunt must have determined that it was too late or too cold for me to be

walking home from the town alone and came into town with Allie to get me.

“Allie, what are you doing here? Did your mum send you down to collect me?” I called without looking around.

“Hi Twitch,” a soft voice murmured. Although the voice wasn’t threatening in any way it sent a shiver of terror down my spine. Only one person called me Twitch - Renee.

She was standing right behind me. The Mana in my body went haywire.

