

RECRUITS

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T H O M A S
L O C K E



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Thomas Locke, *Recruits*
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This Book Is Dedicated To:

Jennifer Leep,
Dave Lewis,
Jessica English,
and the incredible team at
Revell

*What a joy
To work with trusted and gifted friends*



Ten years ago this month, they started drawing the train station, one positioned on another world.

They had the same image burning in their brains, in their *hearts*. The station was a tube pinched at both ends, like a twisted candy wrapper. They argued over how big it was. A couple of miles long at least. And the trains, they were all glass. Not like trains with windows. Glass trains. And the tubes they traveled in, glass as well. But that wasn't the best part.

The trains came and went all over the tube. Top, sides, bottom. Gravity modulation, that was definitely Dillon's term. Sean assumed his brother got the concept from some sci-fi novel, but Dillon insisted it came to him in a dream. Whatever. They drew the station on sheets from sketch pads and pasted them all over their two rooms. Walls and ceilings. Forget posters of rock groups and models. Even as they entered their teens, there was nothing they wanted more than to build on the dream. Leave the same-old behind. And fly

to a world they were somehow sure was more than just a figment of two imaginations. So they kept drawing, adding cities of lyrical majesty that rose beyond the station. They were connected to this place like the ticket was in the mail. Ten years had changed nothing.

The idea came to them when they were seven. Nowadays Dillon claimed it was his concept. But Sean knew his twin was just blowing smoke. Dillon had a highly convenient memory. He remembered things the way he wished they were. Sean decided it wasn't worth arguing over. Dillon tended to go ballistic whenever his remake of history was challenged. But Sean knew the idea was his. Totally.

Still, he let Dillon claim he was the one who came up with the concept. The one that powered them through the worst times. Kept them moving forward. That was the most important thing. They had it in their bones.

Only that spring, the concept and all the bitter yearnings attached to it actually did change into something more.

They were coming from the school bus, walking the line of cookie-cutter homes in suburban Raleigh. They lived in a development called Plantation Heights, six miles northeast of the old town, the cool town. All the good stuff was farther west. The Research Triangle Park. Duke University. UNC Chapel Hill. NC State. Five different party centrals. That particular Friday afternoon was great, weather-wise. Not too hot, nice breeze, Carolina blue sky. Two weekends before the end of the school year was also good for a high, even if

they were both still looking for a job. Just two more of the local horde, searching for grunt work that paid minimum wage at best. But their eighteenth birthdays were only four months and six days off. That summer they would take their SATs and begin the process of trying to find a university that would accept them both. Because they definitely wanted to stay together. No matter how weird the world might find it, the topic had been cemented in a conversation that lasted, like, eleven seconds.

The biggest focus for their summer was to find something that paid enough to buy a car. Their rarely used drivers' licenses burned holes in their back pockets. Their desire to acquire wheels and escape beautiful suburbia fueled an almost daily hunt through the want ads.

Dillon looked up from his phone and announced, "Dodge is coming out with a new Charger SRX. Five hundred and seventy-one ponies."

Sean tossed his brother his backpack. "I'm not hauling your weight for you to go trolling for redneck clunkers."

Dillon stowed his phone and slung his pack. "You and your foreign junk."

"Seven-series BMW, V12, blow your Charger into last week."

"For the cost of a seven-series we could get two Chargers and take our ladies to New York for a month."

"The kind of ladies who would set foot in a Charger would rather go to Arkansas, buy some new teeth."

They turned the corner and saw a U-Haul partly blocking their drive. Two hefty guys were shifting furniture from the truck into the house next door. Moving trucks were a fairly

common sight in Plantation Heights. The development held over three hundred houses. Or rather, one home cloned three hundred times. Which was how Sean came up with his name for the residences and the people who lived here. Clomes.

They stopped, mildly curious over who was moving in next door.

Dillon said, “For a moment there I thought maybe Big Phil had decided to relocate us.”

“Fat chance.”

“We’re going to walk in and he’ll tell us we’re turning urban. We’ll move into a downtown loft. Burn the polyester and go Armani.”

Sean had a quip ready. He always did. Two o’clock in the morning, he’d be woken up by some comment his brother had dreamed up, literally. The response was always there, just waiting. Only this time his retort died unspoken, because their new neighbor came out his front door.

Adult clomes basically came in two shapes. The fitness freaks had skinny moms and overpumped dads. They talked about their bikes or their yoga or their weekend trips to hike around Maui in an hour. The other clomes wore their sofas like lounge suits. The farthest they moved was to the fridge or the backyard grill. They talked about . . . Actually, Sean didn’t really care what they talked about.

Their new neighbor definitely did not fit in Clome Heights.

For one thing, he only had one hand.

The left sleeve of his shirt was clipped up, hiding the stump that ended just below his elbow. He limped as he walked. He was lean and dark complexioned, like he’d been blasted

by some foreign sun for so long his skin was permanently stained. This man could have taken the biggest guy in Plantation Heights and turned him into a clome sandwich. One-handed.

When the guy turned around, they probably saw the scar at the same moment, because Dillon dragged in the breath Sean had trouble finding. The scar emerged from the top of his shirt, ran around the left side of his neck, clipped off the bottom third of his ear, and vanished into his hairline. Military-style crew cut. Of course. The jagged wound was punctuated with scar tissue the size and shape of small flowers.

Their neighbor spoke to the two movers in a language that didn't actually sound like he was talking. More like he *sang* the words. And they responded the same way. How three big guys could sing and sound tough at the same time, Sean had no idea. But they did.

Then they saluted. Like Roman soldiers in the old movies. Fist to chest. Another little chant. Then the movers got in the U-Haul and drove away.

The guy then turned and stared at them. Which was when Sean realized there was something mildly weird about two teenage kids standing in the street, gawking at this guy like they were looking through a cage at the zoo. For once, Sean's nimble mind came up with nada. He just stood there. The intensity of that man's look froze Sean's brain.

Their neighbor said, "So. You must be the twins. Kirrel, correct?" He waved his good hand at the front door. "Want to come inside for a cup of tea?"

Dillon managed, "Uh, we've got homework."

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The guy seemed to find that mildly humorous. “That is the best excuse you can manage?”

Sean probably would have stood there all night if his brother had not snagged his arm and pulled him away. “Have a nice day,” he said.

Dillon waited until they were inside to say, “‘Have a nice day’? Really?”

“Go start your homework, why don’t you.” Sean moved to the front window. But the guy was gone. The street was empty. Silent. Just another day in Clomeville. Except for the man who had just moved in next door.