

Bucky Jackson

The Boy Who Could Fly

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Chapter One

Picking up speed, he flew past houses and cars while weaving back and forth between the trees. Climbing higher still, his pajamas flapped against his sides as he accelerated faster and faster. The thrill of flight was overwhelming. Diving towards the city below, the boy went faster than he thought possible. Bucky could not help but let out a squeal of excitement as he dodged in and out of the tall buildings. Rolling like a fighter plane, he dove through an open window and navigated his way through offices and cubicles at breakneck speed. Like

lightning, his small body zipped past the surprised employees, grinning fiercely as he sent papers flying in his wake before rocketing out the far side of the building.

Hanging in mid-flight Bucky paused to look around. Suddenly he spied it. There in the distance was the packed coliseum; the open top and bright lights seemed to be beckoning him.

Like a meteor he streaked toward the cheering stands below. As the ground rushed up to meet him, he waited until the last instant before pulling up. Around him he could hear the crowd gasp in surprise. Then, there in front of him, Bucky spotted the quarterback throwing the football downfield. As if it had been meant for him, he turned with ease and intercepted the ball, much to the shock of the receiver who still ran with his hands out in anticipation of the catch.

Bucky had no problem making it to the end zone ahead of the stunned players. Dropping lightly to the field, he made a great display of spiking the ball, slamming it into the grass with all his might before rising back up into the sky as the crowd went wild. Dancing in mid-air, Bucky soaked up the wild applause while taking in the scene. On one side of the stadium the cheerleaders chanted his name; on the other, the crowd started a wave in his honor. Hundreds of fans held up cardboard signs

that spelled out BUCKY ROCKS in giant letters. The sound was deafening as he floated six feet off the ground and slapped the upheld hands of the home team as the players cheered and congratulated him for winning the game. It was exhilarating in ways Bucky had never imagined. Flying made Bucky feel wonderful, feel free, and...

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

...and wide awake! The screech of the alarm clock rudely ripped away his dream as if someone had suddenly splashed him with a bucket of cold water.

“Noooo!” he groaned, vainly trying to hang on to the glorious sensations of flight. He was not ready to return to reality yet, to the regular world where he was not an amazing boy who could fly higher than a plane or soar faster than any bird. He wanted more than anything to get back to that incredible feeling, to be one with the sky again, but he knew it was gone for the night.

“Terrific,” he grumbled as he reached out blindly with his arm and switched off the alarm clock. He cringed at the thought of another day of school. It was not that Bucky hated school so much as he dreaded the time between classes when he had to walk down the hallways, an easy target for the jerks and bullies who liked to pick on the

small and defenseless. Sighing, he pulled the pillow over his head in a feeble attempt to shut out the day.

Bucky was well aware he was not the most popular kid in school. Not even the second most popular. In fact, in a school of hundreds he had a grand total of two friends. Worse yet, they were no more popular than Bucky. If anything, the three were junior high outcasts.

Staggering into the bathroom, Bucky carefully studied himself in the mirror. Short for a twelve year old, he sighed as he poked half-heartedly at his unruly brown hair. “Stupid hair,” he muttered. No matter what he did, it never seemed to stay combed. Glancing closer at his reflection, he tried for the thousandth time to understand what was wrong with him. How exactly was he different from the other kids at school? And for the thousandth time, he had no real answer.

“I’m not bad looking or hideous or anything...” he decided turning his face to one side in the mirror. *Not bad at all*, he thought. So maybe he was not as handsome as Brett Hendricks, the star quarterback. But then no one was according to his dumb old sister Angie. *But seriously*, he thought with a final scrutiny, *I am certainly not ugly by any means.*

“Aren’t you done in there yet? It’s not like you’re the only one who uses this bathroom y’know, Nerd Boy!” Angie roughly elbowed her way to the sink.

She paused long enough to glare down at her brother, “You still here?” Bucky quietly shuffled out of the bathroom and downstairs to breakfast. A year older and mean as a snake, Angie liked nothing better than tormenting her little brother. At school, however, she went to great lengths to totally ignore his existence.

“Even *she* has more friends than I do”, Bucky said miserably as he trudged down the stairs. Compared to Bucky, Angie was a regular socialite. She had dozens of friends, hung out with the cheerleaders, and got invited to all the cool parties. Her long blond hair and fair complexion made her a hit with the boys and the envy of the girls.

Usually he would have snapped at her to get lost, but on mornings after the dreams he was always quiet and subdued. The flights had started a year ago and had become more and more frequent. At first they were a little alarming. The feeling of floating through air and looking down and seeing the ground so far below had scared him. Lately, though, Bucky had come to look forward to bedtime and the freedom and excitement of flying.

But, waking up after flying all night was like one minute you had a million bucks, then suddenly--*poof*--it was all gone. Nope, try as he might, he just did not have the will power to argue with Angie. He was just too sad this morning.

“She’s just lucky I didn’t let the dog lick her toothbrush again,” he muttered, sighing deeply. Last night’s dream had been especially good. That only made waking up to the real world all the more painful.

“Tuesday,” Bucky said dismally. The weekend seemed impossibly far away, especially *this* weekend. Saturday his dad was taking him camping. “Can’t wait.” he smiled. “Just me, Dad and no stupid Angie!”

Well, there’s at least one good thing about Tuesdays, Bucky thought with a small grin, pulling a chair up to the table. *Tuesday is pancake day!* It was one of his father's specialties. Dad could cook the most perfectly golden pancakes. Fluffy and light and fresh off the griddle so the butter melted right in.

Fifteen minutes later he was buttering his last flapjack. A cold nose nudged his arm and caused Bucky's hand to flip it onto the floor. Moving fast, Bucky grabbed the fallen pancake before the slow-moving dog could.

“Bruno,” he said affectionately roughing up the thick fur on the top of the shepherd’s head, “you remember

what the vet said. You're going to turn into a giant sausage with legs someday if you don't cut back a little." Grunting in response, the plump dog sank heavily to the floor under the table to wait for an easier meal to come his way.

"How are those pancakes, Buck?" Dad called from the stove.

"Perfect," Bucky smiled broadly and held up a thumb to show his approval. Pinching the rescued pancake between his fingers, Bucky had to stifle a laugh as he slipped it on top of the stack waiting on his sister's plate.

Thirty seconds later Angie flounced down the stairs and plopped down in her chair. Bucky turned to her, smiling sweetly. Angie's eyes narrowed to slits as she looked at her brother.

"Did you spit on this?" she asked suspiciously stabbing at the pancakes on the plate in front of her.

Bucky never got to answer as his mother walked in and ruffled his hair before giving her husband a kiss on the cheek.

"Gooood morning," she said happily as she accepted a plate from her husband. "And how are the pancakes?" she smiled. Mom was in sales so she did that a lot. Smile, that is.

"*Mine* are perfect," Bucky announced, ceremoniously shoveling in his last bite.

"Mine are a little crunchy," Angie said moodily picking at her breakfast. She always had something bad to say about the food. Usually it was not true. Usually.

"Well, these look simply scrumptious, Dear" Mom announced smiling affectionately at her husband and spreading the butter on extra thick. "Did you two sleep well?" she asked pausing to look up at the kids.

Bucky wistfully remembered his dream. The memories, though fading, still made him feel a little better.

"Tinkerbelle, here probably dreamt he was flying all night," Angie said with a scowl. She shoved another forkful of pancakes into her mouth, satisfied that she had made her brother squirm in his chair. Bucky knew he never should have told her about the dreams.

Bucky focused on his food and tried to pretend he did not hear her, but his mother spoke up in her ever-cheerful voice.

"Bad dreams, Honey?" she asked. Her voice was cheerful, but the smile seemed to have frozen on her face.

"He says he dreams he can fly. Like a bird, you know. Without a plane," Angie mocked, flapping her arms up and down like wings and dripping syrup on the floor. Bruno scrambled to quickly lick it up before anyone

noticed. "I mean," she added with a flip of her hair, "how lame is *that*?"

She pointed her fork at her brother then went back to eating without noticing her parents look at each other with worried eyes.

"Oh, it's probably nothing." Bucky's mother tried to dismiss it with a weak smile. Neither of her children noticed how strained her voice sounded. Across the room Bucky's dad raised an eyebrow as his parents exchanged concerned looks.

"Better go." Bucky glanced at his watch as he stood up to put his plate in the dishwasher. "Gotta meet Betty and Carl at the corner."

"Yeah, you don't want to miss your dweeby friends." Angie's nose wrinkled up in disgust.

"Angie!" Bucky's mother said with an annoyed look.

"It's okay, Mom." Bucky leaned over just a few inches from his sister's face and whispered, "I know why your pancakes are crunchy."

"Bye, Mom! Bye, Dad!"

Not waiting for his sister's response, Bucky grabbed his backpack and quickly took off. As he ducked through the doorway he heard Angie sputtering while his dad reassured her that the pancakes were already on the table when Bucky came down. With a crooked smile, he closed

the door behind him and headed for the corner where he would meet his only two friends in the whole world.

His smile soon faded, however. As if the thought of another long day at school was not bad enough, trudging along in his stupid uniform made the day seem even more dreary. He hated the way the starched pants scratched at his legs when he walked. And the shirt was just as bad. The color was dark and bland and *why* did they have to make these clothes so uncomfortable to wear? His parents had said they wanted the best for their children, but Bucky just could not understand how sending children to a private school in an ugly uniform was best for anyone.

"Sure," Bucky thought as he plodded along scratching at the back of his neck, "If you're one of the beautiful people like Angie and her friends then a uniform doesn't matter. But when you're like me, it just makes you look like more of a dork."

"Hi, Bucky," Betty's monotone voice said as he drew close. Known since first grade as Batty Betty, she was even more of an outcast than Bucky. Tall and thin with straight, brown hair, she was a head taller than Bucky. Like him, she was not unsightly although her choice of glasses left a lot to be desired. The huge plastic frames seemed to hide half her face and made her eyes look like two little dots. To Bucky it seemed like she spent most of

her life pushing the immense glasses back up her long, skinny nose.

It didn't help that she always spoke like a robot either. She did not mean to; it was just the way she said things. Sometimes it sounded to Bucky like she was constantly talking through her nose. Everything always came out in one long, droning tone.

It reminded Bucky of the voices of those old science teachers they have in movies who can put all their students to sleep in ten minutes flat. *The earth's moon, its only natural satellite, is 238,857 miles away and takes 28 days to orbit ... Z-Z-Z-Z*

"Hey, Betty," Bucky acknowledged his friend halfheartedly.

"You were flying again last night, weren't you?" she asked squinting closely at his sour expression. Although her voice sounded a lot like a robot with a cold, she always seemed very insightful when it came to understanding other people's emotions. Smart as a whip, Batty Betty could read you like a book.

"We should sit down and talk about these dreams," she said as her glasses slowly began to slip down her nose. "There must be a deep psychological reason why you want to fly. Maybe it represents your inner need to escape everyday life. Maybe you want to be noticed, be special

somehow," she said pensively pushing her glasses back into place. "Heck, what do I know? Maybe you just want to be a bird. You know, maybe some deep unfulfilled need to lay an egg," she joked, jabbing Bucky gently with her elbow.

"Seriously, though, Bucky," she added chewing on the end of a pencil and looking him over. "Whatever they mean, they sure put you in a deep funk the next day."

"Is it that obvious?" Bucky asked even though he knew it was. Betty gave a weak shrug in response.

"Um...where's Carl?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"Oh," she sighed pushing a strand of lank hair out of her eyes. "He's in the bushes watching that truck parked by the building for terrorist activity." Betty was careful to indicate the direction with her eyes only. She knew better than to point or wave her arm in his direction. Carl threw a fit when anyone gave away his hiding place while he was on stakeout.

Known to his friends as Conspiracy Carl, he was an avid reader of suspense and spy novels. Some of the books he read were very advanced. Stuff that even bored adults: ancient mysteries, little known facts, military hardware. Conspiracy theories were his favorite, however.

Aliens, government cover-ups, secret spy agencies. The more bizarre the theory, the more Carl ate it up.

“He thinks it’s a truck bomb,” Betty whispered rolling her eyes behind her oversized glasses.

“Is Carl in the big bushes by the stairs or the little ones by the sidewalk?” Bucky asked shifting his eyes sideways to watch a woman walking a large, shaggy dog approach.

“The little ones by the sidewalk. Why?” She asked resisting the urge to look as the woman’s dog stopped and started sniffing the bushes. *Heaven forbid they give away Carl’s location by looking directly at it.*

“That’s why,” Bucky said pointing discreetly at the bush where the dog had raised a leg.

“Ew-w! When will he learn?” Betty said sadly shaking her head. “That’s the fourth time this month.”

The commotion that followed would have been amusing if it had not happened so many times before. Carl sprang up and began shouting at the startled woman. Pacing back and forth, waving his hands in the air and screaming at the top of his lungs, he accused both of them, the woman *and* her dog, of compromising national security and interfering with a sanctioned stakeout aimed at protecting the lives of innocent citizens.

While Bucky tried to keep a straight face, the confused woman slowly started creeping backwards away from Carl. Pulling at her dog’s leash, she stepped warily as if unsure of what Carl would do if she made any quick movements.

Her dog, however, seemed to want to stay. With his large head cocked to one side, he actually looked like he was listening raptly to Carl’s tirade. He even seemed to be enjoying it and every few minutes swept his massive tail back and forth across the ground. With a final grunt the woman gave the leash a hard jerk, and the dog reluctantly followed her down the street.

Now that the show was over, Bucky shook his head and remembered how just last summer while Carl was hiding in a dumpster, someone had dumped a whole garbage can full of trash on him. Carl had gone wild that time and accused the surprised man of conspiring to overthrow the free world by targeting his covert operations. It was a wonder that Bucky and Betty did not call him Kooky Carl like everyone else did. Even among a group of social rejects, Carl was an outcast.

Shorter than Bucky, Carl was almost as round as he was tall. With a crew cut and gaps between his teeth, he reminded people of a jack-o-lantern. In the drab, blue

school uniform shirt, however, Bucky thought his friend looked more like a pudgy blueberry than a pumpkin.

“Do you believe that?” Carl had out a handkerchief and was trying to dry his pant leg. “The nerve of some people, just letting their dogs pee anywhere like that. It’s just this type of complete lack of personal discipline that is eroding the very fabric of this country.” Shaking his head in disgust, he continued to dab angrily at the wet spots splattering the front of his uniform.

“Hey, Carl, get caught in the rain again?” The shout came from a tall, orange haired boy across the street. Waiting to cross the intersection were the Vinson twins, the biggest pair of jerks in the entire school.

“Golden showers!” The other brother called out as they both erupted into fits of laughter.

“You’ll be sorry when the New Order starts sending idiots like you to concentrations camps, you morons. You’ll see. Just you wait...” Half of what Carl shouted after that was incomprehensible. The red-headed brothers laughed as they swaggered past, one of them calling the three friends the *Loser Squad*.

“Ignore them,” Betty advised, “They’re just compensating for their own inadequacies by subjugating others to harassment.”

“You mean they’re just jerks.” Bucky summarized her text-book analysis as they slowly started walking again.

“Marlo Serston Academy. What a stupid name for a school,” Bucky grumbled as he kicked a rock on the sidewalk. For the millionth time he wondered why someone had to go and build a private school in his neighborhood. That was one of the biggest reasons they went there. If the school had been farther away, his parents would have probably sent the two of them to public school. Not that it would have changed his social standing a single bit. “At least I could wear different clothes every day instead of a uniform,” he sighed scuffing his shoes and sending a cloud of dust into the air.

So far this had been the start of a normal school day. For Bucky a good day was when jerks like the Vinson brothers left him alone. When you are not very popular there always seem to be people who think they have a right to pick on you

And when you have unusual friends, you tend to attract a lot of attention, Bucky thought with a guilty twinge. *And not the good kind.* He wished they could just be more, well...more *normal*. He watched Carl finish mopping off his pant leg. It was not that Bucky did not

like his friends; he liked them a lot. But how could Betty and Carl not seem to care what people thought of them?

“Batty Betty, I been lookin’ fer you.” The drawling voice was unmistakable. It was Royce Jansen, king of the jerks. Bigger than any of the other kids in the school, he seemed to be enrolled at Serston for only one reason; to bully the smaller kids. Something at which he was quite good.

Swearing a curse under his breath, Bucky knew as soon as he saw Royce that his day had just gone from bad to worse. *Yeah, this is gonna get ugly*, Bucky thought to himself as he hunched his shoulders.

“Why?” Betty asked, surprised that anyone like Royce would be interested in someone like her.

“Nathan Taylor said that you said I was stupid, that's why.” Rising up to his full height, Royce crowded Betty.

“No,” Betty corrected him. “I told Nathan that you project your own victimization onto others as a way to conceal your own dysfunctional home life.”

“Yeah, that's what you said. You said I'm stupid,” he shoved her as a few kids stopped to watch. The Vinson brothers were the first to show, identical sneers already plastered on their faces.

“Make her squirm!” Luke Vinson said as he and his brother playfully jabbed at each other. “That’s right,” Ned Vinson shouted, “show the nerd girl who’s in charge.”

“I did *not* say you were stupid!” Betty said stubbornly. Her face was defiant, her eyes flashing with anger behind her glasses.

Royce gave Betty another shove and sent her reeling back into Carl and Bucky. Betty dropped her books and gave a little gasp as she stumbled awkwardly into her friends.

Not sure what to do, Bucky stepped between Royce and Betty. His father, a former Marine, had always told Bucky to stand up to bullies, especially when they threatened your friends. While that may have made sense to a big, bad, Marine, it was positively insane when you were nothing more than a skinny kid facing a hulking teenager almost twice your size. Still, Bucky did his best.

“Just leave her alone.” Bucky's tried to sound firm, but he cringed inside as he heard it come out more like a plea.

“Lookee here,” Royce taunted. “Batty Betty's boyfriend wants to fight me for ‘er.” Royce laughed for a second. Without warning, the bully snaked his arm out and slapped Bucky hard across the face. Bucky staggered in shock as his head snapped backwards. By the time the ringing in his ears stopped, there was a small trickle of

blood coming from the corner of his mouth. His eyes opened wide as Royce stepped closer to him.

The gathering crowd let out hoots and cat calls at this. The Vinson brothers moved forward, crowding Bucky so he had to step closer to Royce. Behind Betty and Carl a few kids shoved them hoping to provoke a fight.

“I’m not her boyfriend—“ was all Bucky got out before Royce cut him off.

“*I’m not her boyfriend,*” Royce mimicked him in a high, squeaky voice. “I heard *you* said I was stupid, too. What about it?” Royce asked poking Bucky in the chest with his finger forcing him up against Luke and Ned.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” Betty shouted as loud as she could, her small eyes glowered at the bully. She started forward toward Bucky. Around them the growing crowd of kids ooh’ed and aah’ed in hushed tones.

“I pick on whoever I want to pick on,” Royce spat, easily pushing her out of the way and turning his attention back to Bucky. “You gonna let a girl fight for you?”

The crowd had grown into a tight circle around them. For Bucky there was nowhere to go. The shouting and jeering from the other kids made it impossible for him to think of anything intelligent to say. Besides every time he opened his mouth, Royce slapped him across the face.

Looking left, then right, he could not see any exit through the kids who had eagerly gathered for the fight.

As tears of frustration stung his eyes, a strange thought entered Bucky’s mind. He had no idea why he thought it, but it seemed that the only safe place for him right now was straight up. When he saw Royce draw back his hand to slap him again, he closed his eyes and braced for the smack that never came. They had been closed for what seemed a long time when he realized that the crowd had grown silent.

Opening his eyes to see where everyone had gone, Bucky found himself hanging ten feet in the air directly above Royce. The whole crowd had stopped yelling and stood there with their mouths hanging open. Even Becky and Carl stared in disbelief as their friend hovered over them. Bucky was so surprised he lost his train of thought. As soon as that happened, he dropped like a brick. Luckily for Bucky, but not for Royce, he landed directly on the bully’s head.

It was like someone had dropped a bag of bowling balls onto Royce’s head. With a crash, the bully collapsed to the ground under Bucky’s weight. When he hit the sidewalk there was a horrible crunching sound. Bucky sat there, sprawled atop his enemy. Not sure exactly what had just happened, he awkwardly scrambled to his feet.

This time the crowd gave him room as the kids gathered in groups and whispered excitedly.

With a groan Royce lifted his head and opened his mouth to curse. Bucky's eyes widened in horror. Royce was missing half of his front tooth! If Royce had only been going to beat him up before, he most certainly was going to kill him now.

Of the group, the only one still thinking was Carl. Grabbing both Betty and Bucky by the arms, the chubby boy dragged them away as fast as he could. In the process, Bucky stepped on one of the Vinson brother's feet, knocked him down, and literally climbed right over the top of him. Without looking back they ran all the way to class, seconds before the first bell rang.

Trying hard to settle into the familiar routine of school, Bucky tried not to notice the furtive stares or hear the excited whispering from some of the kids around him. He had always thought it would be great if someone, anyone, noticed him, but now he would settle for being able to go back to blending into the woodwork. Each period he moved swiftly from class to class, trying not to be seen in the hallway where he might meet any of the people from the fight that morning.

Bucky spent the whole day nervously shifting in his seat expecting to see Royce at any moment. He had never

been so worried in his whole life. Surely Royce was just waiting until lunchtime to beat him up. In anticipation of that, Bucky skipped lunch and hid in the library. That's where Carl and Betty found him.

"How did you do that?" Betty's usual monotone voice had an excited pitch to it.

"That was like...like the Matrix, Man!" Carl was even more excited.

Bucky stared in confusion at his two friends. He truly had no idea what had happened except that he had knocked half a tooth out of the biggest, meanest jerk in the entire school. He wished he could feel more like a hero. But deep down Bucky was terrified because he knew that Royce would never, ever let it go.

He had been told many times that bullies were really cowards and that once you stood up to them they would quit bothering you, but he had never actually seen that work.

He knew Royce would come looking for him and he would probably bring friends. *That* was how real bullies did things.

"Bucky," Betty started out in her flat voice, "what were you thinking about right before you flew up into the air?"

“I dunno,” Bucky shrugged. “I guess I was just thinking that the only safe place was straight up.”

“Do it again!” Carl urged him.

“Do what again?” Bucky's voice had an edge to it. Across the room the librarian shushed him loudly.

“Fly,” Betty whispered. “Just think of whatever you were thinking of when you flew into the air.”

“It wasn't really flying. It was more like a jump.” Bucky could not begin to compare what he had done that morning to the wonderful soaring he experienced in his dreams.

“I beg to differ,” Betty disagreed with him. “You hung in the air for quite a while. More than just a few seconds. Everyone is talking about it, and even though they all seem to think that you jumped, I specifically remember counting to five before you started to fall.”

“Dude! I'm telling you. This is Matrix stuff!” Carl said shrilly.

“So no one thinks I flew?” Bucky said turning to Betty. He pointedly ignored Carl as the small boy squirmed in his chair.

“Of course not. It's just too unbelievable.” Betty explained calmly in her best analytical voice. “They saw it, but their conscious mind won't let them believe it because flying is impossible.”

Bucky seemed relieved at this. He had been worried that in addition to becoming Royce's newest punching bag he was going to be labeled a freak as well.

“Maybe the dreams you've been having are like some alien instruction manual for powers they gave you when you were abducted,” Carl said intently. “This is like the X-Files or something,” he added excitedly, already trying to sort out the multitude of alien abduction theories starting to swirl around in his head.

“Try it again, Bucky.” Betty urged, dismissing Carl with an exasperated look.

“Yeah, fly around the room.” Carl added urgently.

I don't believe this, Bucky thought in frustration. Don't they understand Royce is just waiting somewhere to kill me? Not for the first time today, Bucky tried to figure out how far he could get on the \$267.00 he had in his savings account. And my friends? he fumed to himself. All my friends want me to do is perform parlor tricks. Next thing you know they'll want me to pull a quarter out of my ear.

What Bucky *really* wanted was for everyone to leave him alone so he could find a quiet corner of the library to hide in for the rest of junior high. Under the table was beginning to look real good to him. *Maybe there's an empty closet somewhere,* he thought scanning the room.

“Please, Bucky” Betty begged, a plea in her small brown eyes. “Just one more time.”

Bucky thought it was crazy, but he knew they would never let it go until he tried it again. With a dramatic sigh, he tried his best to relax and find that wonderful light feeling he felt in his dreams when he could fly. There was so much turmoil from the fight bouncing around in his head, he had a hard time focusing. Closing his eyes, he slowly felt the tingle of excitement grab him.

That's when he heard Betty and Carl gasp.

Opening his eyes, they were nowhere to be seen. In fact, the whole table they had been sitting at was gone. That was when he looked down to see his friends staring up at him just as stunned as they had been during the fight that morning. Once again, Bucky was so surprised he forgot to concentrate on flying. With a whoosh he fell straight down onto a plastic and aluminum chair with such force the legs bent outwards.

Across the room the librarian threw them a stern look. Fortunately for Bucky, the broken chair was hidden from view by a rack of books.

“I knew it!” Carl exclaimed, “You've been experimented on by the government. That's where you were last Tuesday.”

Bucky sat up and gingerly rubbed his elbow which had hit the corner of a bookshelf on his way down, "I was at the dentist's last Tuesday getting a cavity filled."

“That's just what you *think* you did that day. The government always uses brainwashing and hypnotism to cover that stuff up. I betcha you really didn't need a filling, but they needed an excuse to implant something into your head like a listening device or a tracking bug or something,” Carl said seriously.

“Enough already, Carl!” Betty flashed him an annoyed look from behind her large glasses. Reaching down to help Bucky up from the floor, she added, “This is amazing. Do it again.”

“Don't!” Carl whispered hoarsely. “Something like this has got to be kept a secret. If the Feds find out, you'll be on a dissection table faster than you can say Roswell, New Mexico!”

Bucky and Betty slowly nodded in agreement. For once what Carl said made some sense.

“Where then?” Betty asked quietly.

“I know a place--but not till after school.” Bucky had the perfect location in mind.

“Sure,” Carl said staring apprehensively at the shadows in the corner of the room. “If you're still alive by then.” He lowered his voice and leaned in towards his

friends. “I heard Royce had to be taken to the dentist to get his tooth fixed. He'll be pretty peeved when he gets back. Too bad they couldn't plant something in *his* head,” he added as he pushed his chair back.

“Yeah, maybe something like a brain,” Betty added with a sniff.

Bucky's heart sank. Only half listening to his friends' conversation, he was worried. What good was a trick like floating against the rage of a bully like Royce? Bucky seriously doubted that Royce would fall for the same stunt twice. “When it comes right down to it,” he thought dismally as he trudged with Carl and Betty to their next classes, “I'll be happy to just survive the rest of the day.”

Chapter Two

“So this is it?” Betty asked as they stood in the dry ravine behind Bucky's house.

“It's the most secluded spot I could think of,” Bucky shrugged. He shifted back and forth on his feet, anxious to start. Thankfully, none of them had seen Royce all day. Bucky had panicked briefly after sixth period when he had almost run into the Vinson brothers in the hallway, but he managed to carefully slip past them without being seen.

While he felt grateful to be alive and whole, he was also nervous and on edge. "Let's get on with it," he said irritably to his two friends.

"Wait! Before you go floating away, let me try something." Carl produced a small device from an oversized bag he had brought from home.

"Oh, a Geiger counter," Betty said casually as if everyone had one and it was not at all unusual to see Carl sweeping it carefully up one side and down the other of Bucky's body.

"Yup, but he's not hot. No radiation at all." Carl sounded disappointed.

"Great, my best friends think I'm a radioactive mutant." Bucky scowled. He had thought that it was great learning that he could somehow really fly, and that he could share his new talent with his friends, but now he was not so sure.

"There's nothing wrong with being a mutant," Carl asserted. "The X-men are mutants. Spiderman is a mutant. Nothing wrong with them."

"Except that they're only two dimensional and wear tights like ballerinas." Betty's monotone voice mocked Carl.

"All right, enough you two. I have to concentrate." Bucky closed his eyes but quickly popped them open

again as he remembered what had happened earlier. The sudden shock of finding himself airborne always made him drop like a rock. Deciding to keep his eyes open, he focused on being lighter than air.

"Holy cow, it's working." Carl smiled and pointed to his best friend's feet. Sure enough, there were several inches of air between Bucky's shoes and the ground.

"How long can you do that?" Betty asked curiously.

"I dunno. I'm kind of new at this, you know!" Bucky tried not to sound annoyed, but he knew as much about this as they did. If they would just leave him alone and let him fly! He wanted to feel the exhilaration of flight he got from his dreams.

He was tired of hanging in mid-air like a Guinea pig waiting to see which one of his friends was going to jab him with a needle. He would not be surprised if Betty had a few of them in her backpack.

"Go higher!" Carl was truly excited now.

"No, just see how long you can stay aloft." She already had out an old stopwatch and was writing down numbers in a notebook. Like a good scientist, Betty was trying to determine a baseline.

"That's boring, go real high," Carl urged him, his eyes opened as wide as they would go.

“He'll get hurt if he falls from too high. And he does seem to keep dropping like a lead balloon,” Betty pointed out. “We don't know how much power he has--what if he ran out when he was a hundred feet high? He'd be killed.”

It took all of two seconds for Carl and Betty to launch into one of their usual arguments. Carl always wanted instant results. Betty always wanted to explore a concept in a methodical and scientific manner.

Bucky just wanted to fly. So fly he did.

“Where'd he go?” Carl stood up frantically scanning the sky when he realized Bucky was gone.

“There he is! Wow, look at him go!” Betty pointed, every bit as excited as Carl. So excited, in fact, that her voice had an unexpected squeal to it.

Bucky had finally grown tired of listening to their arguments. He had been listening to them banter back and forth for four years now about everything from Carl's concerns on how the government was using cell phones to brainwash people to Betty's assertion that it *could* be possible that mad cow disease had really started in chickens.

He knew from experience that these little *discussions* could go on for hours, sometimes days.

Hovering a few feet off the ground was a neat trick, but he wanted to *soar*. As the crisp autumn air rushed past

him he was amazed to learn that he seemed to already know how to fly. It was as natural to him as walking. He could not help but wonder if Carl's theory about his dreams being a training exercise were true.

“Wow,” he thought as he carefully banked to the left, “Carl will really have a field day with that idea!”

Curious to see just how fast he could go, he urged his mind to make himself go faster. Bucky pulled his arms in close to his body to make himself more aerodynamic and increase his speed. He finally got to the point where he was going so fast his eyes watered from the wind rushing past him. *Huh*, he mused. *That's something that never happened in my dreams.*

In Bucky's dream flights, it had always seemed so peaceful, but now he was having such a hard time seeing he had to slow down to a manageable speed. Even then he was sure he had to be going at least twenty miles an hour, a hundred feet above the ground. A big grin plastered on his face, Bucky was giddy with the sensations of free flight. Seconds later, though, he nearly lost control when he swept through a swarm of bugs and one of them flew into the mouth.

“Oh, yuck!” He was spitting bug parts out of his mouth. “Oh man, that is disgusting. No wonder bikers never smile.”

Not wanting to lose sight of his neighborhood, he swung around like a jet fighter and headed back the way he had come. In the blink of an eye he realized he had just passed over his starting point. Turning around he tried to go back and found himself overshooting the spot yet again.

“Dang it!” he cursed as he tried to stop altogether. “Maybe this flying stuff is harder than I thought.”

Mentally focusing on the image of hovering in mid-air, he was able to stop. Hanging a hundred feet above the ground, he looked about for a familiar landmark. In the distance he could see houses, lots of houses. Below him he could see people pointing up at him. Remembering Carl's advice about secrecy, he shot off in what he believed was the direction of his house. A few seconds' flight brought him to the ravine from where he had started. Moving along slowly he was able to spot Betty and Carl on the ground as they waved up to him.

Now came the scary part- landing. His previous landings had been none too graceful; a fact that made him recall Betty's advice. Maybe he *should have* started small and worked his way up. “Well, it's a little too late to worry about that now,” he decided ruefully as he focused on getting to the ground in one piece.

Slowly, carefully, he bled off altitude until he was within a few feet of the ground. From there he simply stopped concentrating and *-plop-*dropped softly to the sandy bank. All three of them grinned like madmen. You could not have pulled the smile off Bucky's face with a tow truck.

“That...was...so...cool.” He didn't mean to speak so slowly, but it was like waking one morning from one of his dreams only to find he was still in it. Reality was good for a change.

“Take me up!” Carl begged, squealing in excitement.

“Oh, now there's a good idea. Riding with a student flier.” Betty's dry tone showed what she thought of Carl's suggestion.

“Well, I mean, you know, when you get better at it.” Carl shrugged, realizing how stupid it was to ask. Bucky had just learned to fly and had crashed two out of three times. “Okay, but I get dibbs on the first ride!” Carl declared. “And don't you forget it,” he added, narrowing his eyes and shaking a plump finger in Betty's direction.

“You were sure moving fast.” Betty said in her flat voice. “When you went that way the first time,” she said gesturing to the north, “you had to be going fifty miles an hour.”

“I know. It was great but then my eyes started watering from all of the wind and I had to slow down. I was all the way down by the mall before I could slow down enough to turn around.” Bucky's eyes shone as he pointed to the sky and described the ride.

“Do you feel fatigued? Tired?” Betty asked jotting things down in her worn notebook.

“Just a little. It's hardly takes any energy at all to fly. I don't know how to explain it. I just imagine myself as extremely light and-BAM! I'm flying. But you know what happened? It was so gross! I had a bug fly right into my mouth.”

“Oh, nasty,” Carl curled up a lip and shook all over like he had been the one to almost swallow a bug. “Was it one of those yellow moths? ‘Cause if it was, they're carrying a whole bunch of these little eggs and-”

“Carl!” Betty's voice stopped her friend from continuing any further.

“Hey, maybe you can go so fast because the aliens put a fusion reactor in your skull!” Carl piped up.

“Fusion reactor! Don't start, Carl,” Bucky said frowning at his friend.

“Are there any missing blocks of time in your life. Days you can't account for?” Carl asked earnestly.

“None that I remember,” Bucky shrugged. *Geez! How do I know there's missing time if I don't remember it?* he thought to himself. Just in case, though, he casually pretended to straighten his wind blown hair with his fingers, while secretly checking his head for any telltale signs of an alien fusion reactor.

“With alien abductions there's always missing time,” Carl pointed out in total seriousness.

“Carl, if you don't stop with the alien conspiracy theories I'm going to take you a mile straight up and let you walk home.” Bucky pointed to the sky above. Carl considered that and closed his mouth tightly, his eyes wary. Carl doubted his friend would really take him up and drop him, *but what if his super powers had driven him crazy like in the Invisible Man?*

“You may be only a little tired because it was a short flight,” Betty said glancing at her notes. “I wonder what would happen in a longer flight? It makes no sense to believe flying doesn't somehow drain your energy, just like jogging or bicycling would. There is no such thing as infinite energy. I think we should work out some experiments to get more substantial data...” she droned on more to herself than to the boys.

Ignoring Betty's comments, Bucky just wanted to get back in the air. "I want to try again, but it's hard to find my

way back. We need a signal or a beacon or something." Bucky tried to think of a way to keep from getting lost.

"We could use this," Betty suggested looking up from her writing. She opened a small, metal locket she wore. The shiny interior glinted in the sunlight.

"Too small. Try this." Carl pulled a case from his pocket. Hunching over it as he thumbed through the contents, Carl was careful to hide the rest of the items in the case from his two friends as he produced a small mirror.

"What the heck you got in there anyhow?" Bucky playfully tried to grab the case out of Carl's hands.

"No!" Carl was adamant, his fat, little cheeks puffing out excitedly as he gripped the container.

"He probably has a picture of Amy Foster in there." Betty's mouth curled down at the edges as she spoke the name.

"Amy Foster?" Bucky was surprised. "Captain of the cheerleading squad? Give it up, Carl. If she even knows your name, she probably calls you Kooky Carl like everyone else. I'm sorry, man," Bucky tried to soften the blow when he saw Carl's hurt look, "but she's out of *both* our leagues."

"Besides, she only dates jerks like Royce. You are *way* too smart for a bimbo like her," Betty added reaching out to pat Carl on the shoulder.

"She's dating snaggletooth?" Bucky asked with a mischievous grin. Carl smiled at that.

"Dude, you knocked out her boyfriend's tooth. That is soooo cool." Carl held up a sweaty palm for Bucky to high five.

"We'll *all* be missing teeth in the morning when Mister Cro-Magnon catches up with us," Betty pointed out sharply, bringing them all back to reality. If Royce was mad at one of them, he would be mad at them all.

"I say we sneak over to his house, steal his grungy underwear, and run them up the flagpole at school. Right there in front of the whole school so everyone could see them. That'd be awesome!" Carl snorted.

"No, I have a better idea," Bucky said with a wicked grin on his face.

Chapter Three

“Royce lives just up ahead,” Betty pointed to the white house on the corner. It was a small house with a broken fence and overgrown yard. “He’s so lazy he usually waits for his victims close by. Doesn’t like to have to go very far to pick on people.”

“I do my killin’ before breakfast.” Carl mimicked the bully in a deep voice. They all laughed at that.

“Channel three?” Bucky asked as he switched on his radio.

“Check!” Carl answered like he was Sergeant Rock or something. “Testing. Testing.”

“I hear you already,” Bucky answered as he plugged in the earpiece to the inexpensive 2-way radios from Carl’s private stock of surveillance gear.

“Now these are encrypted to forty-eight bits on a random repeating analog signal. No chance of them being cracked by anything but black ops.” Carl was about to tell them more when Bucky stopped him. For Carl there was no such thing as overkill.

“Enough already. You two get started. Give me a holler if you get into trouble.” Bucky flashed them a thumbs up as they departed.

Just as Betty had predicted, they were barely past Royce’s house when they ran into him. As he pushed his way menacingly toward them through the crooked gate, Betty and Carl allowed themselves a quick smile. Although they knew about the tooth that he had needed to get capped, they did not know about the black eye. While they were pleased at the extra injury that had befallen their enemy, they both knew it meant Royce would now be twice as mad and twice as mean.

“Batman! Batman! We need close air-support in front of Godzilla’s house. Batman, I repeat—” Carl’s voice over the radio was cut off abruptly.

“I asked you where your loser friend is?” Royce lifted Carl by the front of his shirt as he snarled in his face. His

feet dangled off the ground as Carl smirked and pointed to the sky. Confused, the bully looked to see what, besides a death wish, would make Kooky Carl smile at a time like this. No one ever smiled when they were about to get a patented Royce butt-kicking. *Why the heck would Kooky Carl grin like an idiot?*

The paint-filled balloon that smacked him in the face took him by surprise, and left his shoulders and head streaked in bright pink. Royce was so startled that he released his grip on Carl's shirt. Betty and Carl quickly scrambled off to the side and out of the way of incoming fire.

Swinging madly around, "You try that again you pun-" was all he got out before another balloon hit him from behind.

"Oh, what an absolutely *smashing* shade of green," Betty said trying to mimic the English lady on the home decorating show her mom always watched.

"And isn't he simply a delight in turquoise," Carl chimed in as another balloon exploded all over the bully's head. "You know, Betty," Carl added, "not everybody can carry off wearing a color like that. But *he* makes it look good."

"Pilot to bombardier, we have a *stupid* target at twelve o'clock. Fire at will!" Bucky laughed maniacally as he

dove on the confused bully. He released his last three balloons as Royce went down under a hail of yellow, red, and orange.

"Oh, fall colors! How terribly *seasonal* of you, Bucky," Betty laughed.

Royce's eyes were so wide they could have popped out of his big, square head. Turning to run blindly from his attacker, he made it all of three steps before running straight into a light pole at a dead run. Like a half-limp piece of spaghetti, he wobbled a little before collapsing to the ground. As Bucky swooped past he could not help but notice that Royce had broken his other front tooth.

"That was nice," he said offhandedly, landing as gently as a bird next to his comrades.

"Inspiring," Betty agreed.

"Yep," Carl said clearing his throat as he straightened his rumpled shirt. "That'll leave a mark."

* * *

Arriving at school was different that day somehow. At first Bucky could not put his finger on it, then he realized what it was.

Normally Bucky, Betty, and Carl felt as if they were transparent. No one ever noticed them, not even to let them pass in a crowded hall. Sometimes Jocks would muscle right through them like they were not even there.

Today was different, though. It seemed like everybody saw him. People were not exactly jumping out of their path as they walked to their lockers, but they were definitely being noticed as they made their way through the bustling hallways before first period.

In fact, so many people had taken note of their passing that it made Bucky feel creepy. Sure, a few kids who had been at the fight had stared and whispered about him yesterday, but not like this. In truth, being noticed was such a strange feeling to Bucky that even one or two people noticing him felt odd. Having dozens of people stare at him, stopping to whisper to their friends was downright eerie. The Jocks still plowed through their threesome without noticing, but a lot of others stepped back as they passed to let them by.

“Way to go, Bucky,” squeaked a high-pitched voice belonging to Gerard Simmons, a member of the chess team. As he went by, he held up a hand for a high-five.

At first Bucky was stunned enough to not even know how to respond. No one had ever high-fived him except Betty and Carl. After an uncomfortable pause Bucky smiled weakly and smacked Gerard's hand.

“You da man!” Gerard said emphatically before continuing down the hallway with a few of the other chess team members.

“What was that?” Bucky asked cautiously as they got to his locker.

“They probably heard about yesterday with Royce,” Betty answered grimly. “He used to pick on those guys every day at lunch.”

“Dude, you know what this makes you?” Carl asked with an eager grin. “You're king of the nerds, man!”

Bucky groaned and wished they had never run into Royce again this morning. Any feeling of elation he had from running Royce into a light post was gone now. After a lifetime of wishing he was popular, he suddenly wished he was invisible again.