

Preview

Simon's Last Stand

Rich Samuels

Rich Perceptions

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Chapter One

Anika

When I was little, I imagined that I had a hidden superpower that I hadn't yet discovered.

I spent long afternoons trying to move objects with my mind, attempting to see through walls, levitate in mid-air, or predict the future. I failed every time and eventually concluded that I didn't have any powers at all.

I was convinced other kids had powers, though: some were insanely great gymnasts and could fly through the air like birds. A friend in second grade was an incredible artist, and there were always super-smart kids in class who seemed possessed with an unearthly brain. But eventually, I grew out of that fantasy and realized that they didn't have superpowers either. They had something much worse.

Talent.

Talent was real, and I was consumed with a growing dread: What if I had no talent at all?

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All I could see around me were kids who had *abilities*. I spent middle school obsessed with it. I did okay, and it wasn't like I didn't have friends, but I was haunted by the fear that I wasn't *special*, and I was afraid that sooner or later, everyone was going to figure it out.

Then, just a month into high school, everything changed.

It took only one day. By the time three o'clock rolled around, just about everyone knew Simon—a new kid who had started the day from absolute *zero*. His family moved in just a week before school started, so when he walked through the door, he was a total mystery to everyone.

For about ten seconds.

I met him when I entered my homeroom for the first time. He was already there, and already the center of attention, saying hi to everyone like they were longtime friends. He saw me and his face lit up.

“Hi, I’m Simon!” he waved as if he were excited and rushed up to me. For a second, I thought he was going to be creepy and try to hug me.

“Hi,” I hesitated. “I’m Anika?” It came out sounding like a question because I wasn’t sure I trusted this strange kid.

He threw up his hands as if he were giving up and laughed, “I’m new.” He paused and then said, “And I’m also Simon. I know, bad joke.” He laughed at himself, and that made everyone laugh with him.

Even Kurt, the most sarcastic, anti-fanboy I knew, seemed entranced. “He’s new!” he laughed.

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In those last few minutes before class, Simon insisted we all repeat our names two or three times so that he could remember us, and we did exactly what he asked. Then, he was full of questions. He wanted to know every single thing about us: Did we all go to the same elementary school? Did we all grow up together? What do we do for fun? He guessed (correctly) that I was Indian, and guessed (wrongly) that Kurt was Swedish (it had to be a joke—Kurt is about as opposite of Swedish as you can get). Simon wouldn't stop talking, so no one had time to answer, but then none of us cared either. He was fun to watch, and he made the rest of us feel too awkward to say anything. We were all laughing by the time the bell rang.

I felt the same sense of wonder I had as a little girl. He *had some kind of superpower*, but I had no idea what it was.

Teachers were under his power, too. He liked to talk and answer questions, but never to show off. On that first day, I noticed that he lingered after the three classes we shared—algebra, English, and history—and chatted up the teachers like they were old friends. He introduced himself the same way he did with all of us. You could tell that they were suspicious at first, but he followed the same pattern—he'd quietly joke with them, they would laugh, and then he'd make his exit. If it were anyone else, I would think it was weird.

He claimed a table in the lunchroom, and I think he would have invited the entire school if they could have fit. Kurt joined him, and Simon waved me over, too. We were the *originals*, but it only grew from there.

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On the second day, Simon noticed this really short kid wandering past the table with his tray, looking kind of lost. Simon waved him over.

Kurt looked the boy up and down suspiciously. “Aren’t you kind of young for high school?”

“I skipped two grades,” the boy answered, adding too proudly, “I’m a genius. And I can’t help it if I look young.”

“A genius,” Kurt repeated, mocking him.

The kid stood there awkwardly with his tray, looking over all of us suspiciously.

Simon laughed, “Well, sit down!”

The boy did, but I could tell he wasn’t sure what was going on.

“I’m Simon! What’s your name?”

“Noah Merris.” He said his name, as if we should have known.

“Can I call you Noah?”

He studied Simon.

“I suppose so.”

Kurt imitated him again, “I suppose so,” and laughed at himself.

Simon glared at Kurt, who got the message immediately and even said, “Sorry” to Simon.

Another Simon power. Influencing people with just a look.

By Wednesday, it felt like everyone was stopping by the table to say *hi* to Simon. Even the most popular kids didn’t get that kind of attention.

But now *Simon* was the most popular kid.

I even asked Kurt, “How does he know so many people already?”

Kurt just shrugged. He was as mystified as I was.

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It was almost as if Simon had some kind of popularity power—except he wasn't really trying to be popular. He was all about being friendly.

He had so many powers I couldn't figure them out.

At our table, Simon liked to keep things moving. If no one had anything else to say, he would jump in with something new.

"So, I have a story."

From the first day, Simon got us all to stop what we were doing with that same line. We would all look over at him, and once he knew we were all paying attention, he'd tell us another chapter of what he called "Clueless Simon," stories about him acting stupid.

"Clueless Simon Number Five: In my old neighborhood, there was this kid named Derrick, and he had this huge basement with all these, like, closets built into the wall with all these doors, but the thing was, they weren't all like separate. It was all empty behind there, so you could crawl in one door and climb out another one ten feet away."

If you really thought about it, his stories weren't really about much, but he told them like they were incredible adventures, all excited with his hands flying around. It was always interesting, even when it wasn't—another talent. Or power. And every story had him as the punchline.

"And one day, I must have been about eight, I crawled in there, and he turned out the light, and I got lost. I mean, *lost* inside there!"

"Couldn't you just open a door and get out?" Noah asked.

Simon laughed, "I know, right?"

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Simon had no problem laughing at himself. If it was good for a laugh, it was worth telling.

He kept asking us questions. He asked me if I'd ever been to India, and when I told him I had, he had about a hundred follow-up questions, like he'd studied the place. He asked if I had ever been to the Taj Mahal (an obvious one), but also to the Red Fort, which is this gigantic castle in Delhi built hundreds of years ago, and to Varanasi and the Ganges River, which are amazing but literally no one had ever asked me about. I don't know if he already knew that much about India, or if he looked it up just to ask me questions, but that was solid proof that *There Was No One Like Simon*.

The thing about Simon was that you never felt like he was just trying to be nice. He asked, and then he listened. Noah liked to hear himself talk, but Simon liked to hear *you* talk.

Simon had his own look, too. I wouldn't call it a style, exactly, but you could always spot him in a crowd. Simon was random in his own way. It was like he was challenging everyone to figure him out.

First, I thought he was into hats because he wore a baseball hat on the first day and an old-style newsboy cap on the second day. But then, no hat for a couple of days, and a top hat again on another day. He wore a T-shirt one day, a white dress shirt the next day, and then a baseball jersey the third day. He had this fake tattoo thing going, too, where he would make these little pen marks at different places on his face and arms, and everyone would try to spot them. A little dot under his chin one day, another one on his elbow, another one on his finger. He didn't even say

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anything about it; we just noticed, and it became this thing that we all whispered about after he got to the table. He was playing with us in so many ways that it was hard to keep count.

There was this one big guy—Frank—who bumped into Simon on purpose. Frank tried to make a big thing out of it, as if he wanted to fight. We all knew he was jealous. We all stood up, ready to show power in numbers, but Simon calmly waved us back to the table like he wasn't concerned, and we watched him handle it: Frank was trying to stare him down like he was tough, and Simon stood there watching him and casually finishing his drink. Then, when Frank was finished growling or talking or whatever he was doing, Simon asked him casually, "I heard you got to ride in a supercar."

I didn't even know what a supercar was, but Frank was suddenly talking to Simon like they were best friends. Once he walked away, Kurt turned to Simon like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"How did you even *know* that?"

Simon studied Kurt for a moment, smiling as if he knew a funny secret. "It's obvious," and sat back down.

"But how did you know?" I asked him. I knew Kurt was wondering the same thing: Could *he read minds*?

Simon thought about it for a few seconds and told us, "Frank has a patch on his backpack that says, Martin Springs. That's where the racetrack is. And it was blue, which is the racetrack color. And he looks like a kid that would ride in a supercar."

That seemed hard to believe. "And?"

"I just guessed."

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“How?”

“Frank’s last name is Masters.”

“And?”

“Johnny Masters was one of the most famous race car drivers ever. Obviously, Frank’s going to get to ride in one.”

We tried to take that all in, and then Simon added, “Plus, he never stops talking about his *Uncle Johnny* on social.”

The way he put it, it was really pretty obvious.

Yeah.

Simon Power was a thing.

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Chapter Two

Kurt

It wasn't just that Simon was funny (he was). It wasn't that Simon was friendly (he was). It wasn't just that Simon was just as good on the basketball court as he was standing in front of a history class and giving a report (he was).

And it wasn't even that Simon seemed to know everything about everything, which is almost always annoying with anyone else (like Noah, for example).

Simon did nothing for show; he wasn't trying to prove anything when he played sports, or act like someone who has charisma but couldn't look you in the eye. He didn't run his mouth just to prove he knew more than you.

When he guessed that Frank was related to Johnny Masters, you could hear the amazement in his voice; it was the *discovery* that excited him. He liked to share his excitement, which made being around Simon exciting all by itself. Everything he learned was a brand-new find that he couldn't wait to share.

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RICH SAMUELS

When I walked home with Simon that day (we lived on the same street), he stopped abruptly and looked at me with surprise.

“Whoa!”

I looked behind me to see what he was reacting to. There was nothing there but a tree.

“What?” I looked at the tree, trying to figure out if there was something strange about it, and then looked back at Simon. “What are you looking at?”

He pointed at me as if it were something obvious.

“What?”

He turned away from me and resumed walking. “You’ll figure it out!”

I glanced down at my clothes. No stains. My zipper wasn’t open. Nothing out of the ordinary.

I ran to catch up with him, laughing.

“Come on! Tell me!”

Simon stopped again and looked at me with a wry smile.

“Did I do something?” I asked. “What’s so funny?”

“Kurt.”

I felt like he was going to let me in on some secret.

“*What?*” I asked for the third time.

Simon held out two closed fists. “Choose one.”

I studied his fists. “Magic trick?”

“Just choose one.”

“Fine,” I sighed, and pointed at his left fist.

He opened it. Nothing.

“Okay.” I nodded at his right fist. “The other one then.”

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He opened that hand.

Nothing.

For an instant, I thought maybe he was trying to make me feel stupid.

But that's what other people do. Simon would never do that.

"I don't get it," I admitted, half expecting him to reach behind my ear and pull out a coin or something equally cringy.

Instead, he asked me a question.

"What does that tell you?"

I frowned at him. "That you had nothing in your hands?"

He smiled as if I understood what the heck he was talking about.

"Exactly!" He walked on.

I didn't get the point, and I didn't keep asking, either. Sometimes, you just had to accept that Simon had, like Anika said, "a good heart," and whatever he meant, it wasn't bad.

When I told Anika later about Simon's random reaction and his non-magic trick, she said that was the whole point.

"He's telling you that there's no magic."

"I hate riddles," I complained.

"I think he just likes being one of us," she told me. "I don't think he likes people thinking he's anything special."

But somehow, we thought of it as *Simon's* table.

When Simon first invited Noah to sit with us, that pushed me right to the limit of what I could stand. That was his decision, though, so I shrugged it off. Even with a miniature show-off sharing our table, we still had a few good weeks before Simon added someone else.

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And *that* ruined everything.

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Chapter Three

David

“I ’m Simon!”

I knew who he was, of course, and not just because everyone was talking about him. He lived down the street from me—I could see his house from our apartment balcony. I was watching with my binoculars on the day he moved in. I saw him in algebra and science every day, and I couldn’t miss him if he walked by in the hallway. He was always laughing and being friendly with all kinds of people, and they seemed to stick to him like a magnet. He instantly became one of the popular kids, but not the kind that was a snob. Most kids, in my experience, aren’t like that.

I liked my place under the tree, way out just around the corner of one of the buildings that formed the lunch quad. We were supposed to stay inside the lunch quad, and I was just technically outside, but I was all alone and quiet, and I wasn’t bothering anyone, so nobody bothered me. The teachers just walked by and said nothing, and everyone else at lunch couldn’t see me at all.

It’s better to be alone. I decided that even before I came here.

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RICH SAMUELS

I couldn't figure out why Simon went way out of his way that day to walk to me.

"Hi," he said.

He actually sat down on the grass across from me, which made me nervous.

"I'm Simon."

"I know."

That felt awkward. I'm not good with people.

"Who are you?" he asked.

I looked around in case anyone else was watching.

"I'm David."

"What are you reading?"

I showed him the cover of the book.

"Oliver Twist," he read, "isn't that hard?"

I shrugged and slipped it into my backpack, hoping he'd forget about it. I felt embarrassed.

"I saw the movie," he told me.

"Okay." I was curious which of the infinite versions he meant, but I was too nervous to ask.

"Not the same, I know."

"Okay." I felt kind of scared that he was planning to do something mean to me, even though everyone knew Simon would never do anything bad to anyone.

"Hey, I don't want to mess with your reading, but come to our table."

I looked over at the lunch area with dread.

I don't like crowds.

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I was homeschooled for two years. When they said I had to do real school this year, I decided the best thing to do was to be as invisible as possible.

I'm used to being alone.

I wanted to tell Simon that I was okay where I was, but I wasn't sure how to put it.

"Just try it out," Simon said to me. It was almost as if he could read my mind.

"Try it out?" I thought that maybe I had misunderstood him.

"My table."

He made no sense. Why would the most popular kid in the entire school want the most invisible kid to sit at his table?

He stood and waited for me to answer, but I was too nervous to say no, so I got up and walked with him back across the lawn into the heart of the lunch area.

"This is our table. Guys, this is David."

Everyone said hi (reluctantly, I think)—except for the one person I *did* know.

Kurt glanced at me for about two seconds, then acted like he saw something interesting at some other table.

But *Simon* wanted me to be there, so what was I supposed to do?