

The Summer Set

By Jay B. Province

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DEDICATION

With Love to my wife Patricia
And Appreciation to our friends
Cindy, Lisa & Elizabeth

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1

*T*HE *C*EMETERY

JIM CALENDAR SLIPPED FROM HIS bed and silently dressed in the dark, rolling his broad shoulders into his dark green letter-jacket. He owned a stellar reputation for bold and fearless action in each of the three sports he played, but despite this hard-won renown for gutsiness, the striking of the familiar hall clock at half-past eleven spooked Jim and set his restless imagination on edge. He reminded himself that, at age seventeen, and nearly old enough for the army, fears of the dark and unknown were beneath him. Jim thrust his strong fingers through his wavy brown hair, cast all hesitations aside, and pressed onward. Rolling up a thick wool blanket under his arm, he slipped into the long hallway, brushed a framed family photo off its nail, caught it and re-hung it, cock-eyed, before easing out his back door into the darkness.

At the far side of Jim's journey, like a faint sparkling light at the end of a long tunnel, Leslie DeBrulle waited for him. Leslie had kept Jim in agony the entire spring of 1956, haunting his thoughts with suggestive smiles and devious

laughter, and then suddenly last Friday, leaning against his locker, she'd agreed to his joking suggestion that, some upcoming midnight, they investigate the rumors of mysterious blue lights floating through the St. Boniface graveyard.

Now, spurred on by that memory, Jim jumped two fences to reach a dimly lit street behind his house. He opened up his stride and raced headlong in the direction of the graveyard, which lay like a no-man's land between his and Leslie's distant neighborhoods.

Generations of Williamsport dead filled St. Boniface graveyard's fifty acres of soil to bursting. Its surrounding wrought iron fence tipped mostly outward from the perimeter, a darkly menacing outline pricking the silver moon, leaving Jim uncertain if the fence was meant to keep the living out, or the dead in.

The remote howl of a backyard dog rose in the night air, answered by a howl even more distant, as Jim arrived at the cemetery's towering iron gate. He huddled in the dark just inside the entrance, concealing himself among the tombstones, until he glimpsed Leslie entering cautiously beneath the arch. Her right hand clutched a dark blue cape at her throat, a curl of lustrous black hair dripping across her forehead.

"I was afraid you wouldn't show," she breathed, as he approached her through the thin mist. "I don't think I could've waited thirty seconds in this awful place if I hadn't

found you here."

"I'd wait for you forever," Jim smiled, as Leslie's cold hand took his for guidance. A faint wind moaned through the trees. Equal parts of dread and anticipation filled Leslie's senses, as they groped in the darkness for a clearing to spread Jim's blanket. A late-night mist was already creeping across the cool earth, and Jim instructed her to stand to the side as he spread his warm woolen blanket. The couple dropped down awkwardly, with their legs folded beneath them. The hooting of a lonely owl troubled the dead stillness.

The tips of their fingers touched, but suddenly Jim halted, his head cocking alertly to look and listen in the darkness. He stood up, straight and tall, peering into the blackness. Leslie pushed herself to her knees, watching in disbelief as Jim jumped up on the marble arm of a slender monument cross.

"Jim, get down from there, you lunatic!" Leslie hissed. "You'll fall and kill yourself!"

"There's someone or something out there, Leslie. For just a second, I spotted like a ball of blue electric fire, and then there was some rustling in the bushes."

"Jim, you better not be teasing!" she said crossly, and then more hopefully: "Are you sure?"

In the next instant, the heavy stone cross acting as Jim's perch groaned and sank, tossing him aside, before toppling where he fell, stabbing the soft earth inches from his skull.

A horrified silence inflated in the instant before a shriek tore loose from Leslie's throat. Shaken, she bolted in the direction of the entrance gate. Jim, realizing he was about to lose Leslie, possibly forever, seized the blanket and gave pursuit.

"Leslie, wait a sec!" he pleaded. "Hold up!"

Leslie's cold panic thawed and she slowed to a stop. In the mist her eyes followed Jim's progress, rushing through the headstones. In the distance behind him, she glimpsed what appeared to be softly glowing orbs of blue light drifting through the scattered trees.

"Jim! Behind you! What's that?"

Turning his head, Jim stared in disbelief as lanterns of blue glimmered and floated silently, forty yards away, before they swiftly scooted off, only to reappear at a greater distance. Jim stooped down and scuttled forward, behind a tall gravestone, where Leslie shortly stole in beside him. Together they watched the dancing lights flit in every direction.

"Stay here. I'll be back," Jim growled. "I'm going in for a closer look."

Jim darted away, racing from crypt to cross, ever nearer the lights. The mist obscured his view, but the drifting lights gradually took on more reality. The hissing balls of electricity illuminated the work of two men, whose muffled voices floated in the air, mixing with the wet sound of thudding picks and shovels.

Realizing he'd uncovered more than he bargained for, Jim slowly backed away through the damp grass - two yards, five yards, ten yards - and then his loafers scraped on a cinder walking path, like a single nail drawn across a blackboard. He waited a long moment, before removing his shoes and laying them aside, and continuing his retreat. Fifteen yards from Leslie's hiding spot Jim heard a soft feminine moan of despair and surrender.

"Leslie? You okay?"

There was no answer, only another soft low moan, like air being let out of a tire.

"Leslie?"

Jim raced through the darkness in the direction of Leslie's moan, suddenly stumbling and falling across her motionless form. Struggling to his knees, his arms flailing across her body in confusion, he seized Leslie's limp arms.

"Leslie, what's wrong? Wake up!" Jim shouted. When he shook her, his clenched hands violently punched the thickly coiled body of a large snake, just as its two fangs sank into his left forearm. Jim collapsed face down in the wet grass, drugged and paralyzed, barely breathing.

A tall man in a dark suit stepped out from the shadows, kicking Jim in the ribs with enough force to roll him over on his back. His assailant's eye sockets glittered with an eerie blue light.

"Is Leslie her name?" the man's metallic voice croaked. "We'll be the ones taking care of Leslie from now on."

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His voice seemed faraway - raspy and unreal. Exactly what had just happened to Leslie and to himself puzzled Jim, but not for long.

2

THE BIG GAME

"PETER, MIKE! IT'S TIME TO GO!" Mrs. Miller shouted from the back porch. "Janice and I are working the concession stand today. I need you two to help load the car."

"No sweat, we're on our way," Mike DeSorcier answered, for both, and soon they were busy lifting lawn chairs, folding tables, and a heavy cooler into the huge trunk. Mike was sixteen years old, lean and strong, with rebellious dark hair and surplus imagination. "You're a lucky stiff, to drive this beast, Chum. Do you think your dad would let me borrow it some weekend, to take Jo to the drive-in?"

"Maybe, if he sits shotgun and Jo sits in the back," Peter grinned, his blue eyes teasing Mike. "For real, he doesn't let me drive without him, right beside me."

"My dad's is out of the question," Mike said with dejection. "No girl would be seen dead at a passion pit, in a squad car."

The girl in question was Jo Munro, a changeable blonde

mischief-maker, and a mystery better left unsolved, in Peter's opinion. He forcefully shut the trunk lid.

Peter chauffeured the gang to the ballpark, his father beside him in the middle, his mother and sister, Janice, in the back. Mike sat up front, his elbow out the open window, smiling and waving to the less fortunate souls schlumping on the sidewalks. Peter rolled into the lot at Memorial Park, reading the envy on his teammates' faces. Several fathers surrounded Mr. Miller as he slid out of the car, asking detailed questions about every added feature on his new 1956 Chevrolet BelAir.

Peter and Mike toted the food and supplies to the white block concession stand of the park. Their Lundsford Lumber teammates milled about in small groups, warming up in the outfield. Coach Lundsford called his team to home plate for a meeting.

"Bring it in fellows, circle around!"

Peter and Mike joined the semi-circle of players in front, locking arms to hold back late-comers. Coach Lundsford cleared his throat.

"We have a guest here with us today," he began. "Miss Madeline Hanson, an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I'll let her speak for herself, as to why she's here. Miss Hanson."

An attractive woman in her late twenties or early thirties, wearing a blue suit dress and jacket, stepped forward.

"Are you here because Jim Calendar and Leslie DeBrulle

are missing?" 'Poppie' Schmidt challenged. At fourteen years and two months, 'Poppie' was the youngest member and crack second baseman of the Lundsford Lumber team. His fielding skills were legendary, but his common sense limited. "My dad says they probably ran off together."

Coach Lundsford let out a loud groan, but Miss Hanson fielded Poppie's question expertly.

"Jim Calendar and Leslie DeBrulle are two of the missing persons we're trying to locate, but there are others. I have good reason to believe Jim and Leslie's sudden disappearance was unplanned. If anyone has other information I'd like to know it, as soon as possible. As Mr. Lundsford said, I work for the FBI. All my family and friends call me Maddie, and so can you. I'm a field agent from Los Angeles, California, and I was sent here by our director to investigate some unexplained disappearances of young men and women, about your age, in Williamsport and the surrounding areas of Pennsylvania."

Her handsome figure, husky voice, large brown eyes and matching thick wavy hair entranced the audience of jostling ruffians, and they stepped forward eagerly to accept her business cards.

"I don't want to alarm you, but please take extra care in your activities, and try to travel in pairs at all times. I've opened an office to use for the time I'll be here. If you see or hear anything unusual, please call me at Diamond3-3709, or come and see me in the Grainger Building, on

Third Street, downtown. I'll be watching your game today, so feel free to say hello at any time, and talk to me, if you want."

Coach Lundsford stepped forward to wave off any further questioning.

"Thank you, Miss Hanson. Now listen up, starting with today's city championship, we're switching from the Pledge of Allegiance to the new Homeland Pledge. Coach Jaworzky has copies in the dugout, and I want you all to memorize it."

Russell Huddleston spoke up from the rear of the pack.

"Is it true Commissioner Scott might be forced out of the league by Mr. Blackthorne?"

The other players drew in their breath at Russell's bold question, but they waited for Coach Lundsford's answer.

"Mr. Scott and Mr. Blackthorne disagree on a few matters, but all you have to worry about is playing ball. Any other questions?"

'Moose' Streetway waved his hand.

"I joined Mr. Blackthorne's youth group and we're already using the Homeland Pledge, every day, in our assemblies. I know it by heart. I earned this cool ring last week when I became a platoon leader." Moose held up a red jeweled ring for everyone to see.

Most of the team made their way to Moose's side for a closer inspection. As senior members of the team, in their last year of eligibility, Peter and Mike distanced themselves

from Moose's crude display of rank, and jogged to the dugout. While Peter suited up in his catcher's gear, Mike studied the new Bantam League Baseball Pledge.

I love the flag of our Homeland
Our Homeland flag is more to me
Than my life
I will respect and obey authority
And I will inform authority
If others do not
We achieve victory when youth serves the leader.

"Who's this leader we're supposedly serving?" Mike asked loudly, his fierce eyes flashing. "And we're Americans, for chrissakes, not 'Homelanders'. Why all the changes? This is crap."

Coach Lundsford overheard Mike's opinions.

"DeSorcier, say the pledge if you want to play the game," he snarled, "and if you must know, right now I'm your leader, so show respect and make sure others do the same. Just say the pledge and you'll stay out of trouble."

The umpire called the players from both teams to the field to recite the new pledge. Peter and Mike remained silent throughout, allowing the other players to mumble and stumble over the words.

"Thank you, and remain standing for our National Anthem."

"The new pledge bites," Peter whispered to Mike. He removed his ball cap for the anthem and wiped the sweat

from his brow. The freshly painted scoreboard advertised the red-and-gold phoenix bird symbol of Blackthorne-Triangle Capital, the new sponsors of the Bantam League. In the bleachers, Peter spotted Karen Croft, his science lab partner. He liked the way her pale freckles danced across her nose, ending precisely where her bronzed cheeks began. At the end of the anthem, Karen waved to him and he waved his cap to her, before replacing it over his blond crew cut. Near her, a few scattered people held up signs in support of the Bantam League Commissioner, Clancy Scott, but many more held up signs calling on him to resign.

"I don't recognize any of the people holding up signs against Commissioner Scott," Mike observed. "I wonder who they are, and if this Blackthorne fellow is paying them."

While his teammates raced to their positions, Peter strolled to home plate in his catcher's gear, squatting there to receive warm-up pitches from Mike. Satisfied that Mike was ready, Peter motioned the umpire to send the first batter for Power Pretzel, 'Squeaky' Moorman, to the box.

"Hey, Squeaky, Mike's got his good stuff today," Peter teased. "Did you bring yours?"

"All the stuff I need is right here in my bat. I'll pound those melons Mike throws."

"Okay, let's see what happens."

Peter gave Mike the signal for a brush-back fastball, and Mike delivered a beauty that rattled Squeaky with its sudden

break.

"That's the stuff," Peter whistled. "Man, Mike's red-hot today."

"Shut up, Chum," Squeaky's voice suddenly broke into a high womanly pitch.

"Yessir," Peter smiled. Squeaky surrendered on the next pitch when he swung late and hit a slow roller to first.

"One down!" Peter called.

Mike's pitches sped past the frazzled batters, and he struck out the next two hitters with ease. The first inning was over, and Peter met him at the third base line.

"Nice heat, Mike."

"Squeaky's eyes blew up big as saucers," Mike laughed. "I could see the whites of his eyes from the mound. All he wanted was out of that batter's box."

Lundsford Lumber went into the final inning up 3-0. Mike put down the first two batters, but the next batter stung the ball into right field for a double. Peter took off his catcher's mask, waiting for the on deck batter, Reggie Markum. A tall man in a sharply creased black suit held Reggie up in a meeting at the bleachers. Peter watched with fascinated horror as the man drew on a freshly lit cigarette from a wet hole in his throat, spreading vast gray vapors over the nearby spectators.

"Who's that man?" Peter asked Mr. Davis, the umpire.

"Don't you know? That's Mr. Blackthorne, the new league sponsor."

Peter noted that Blackthorne kept a long black cane imprisoned in the fold of his arm. Crowning the elegant cane was a snake's head, with glassy black eyes and a red capstone. Blackthorne's cold eyes settled on Peter, as he dismissed Reggie to the batter's box, with three loud and slow hand claps. Peter quickly pulled his mask down to avoid the man's awful gaze. The image of Blackthorne's awful throat-hole still burned in Peter's mind, and he felt unfocused and queasy, as if he was somehow trapped inside the thick gray fog surrounding the man.

Reggie rhythmically tapped his bat on home plate, three times. Peter noticed a jeweled ring on Reggie's clenched left hand, identical to the ring Moose had displayed. Reggie was mumbling distantly, hypnotically to himself.

"Chum, let's get on with the game!" Mike yelled from the mound. "One out to go. We're burning daylight."

Lowering himself into an uneasy crouch, Peter signaled for a fastball. Reggie pelted it to the fence, scoring the runner. Peter kicked the dirt in disgust. Reggie, ten feet off second base, taunted him with a jiggly dance. Peter took the bait, and impulsively whipped the ball to Poppie at second base, hoping to catch Reggie off the bag. Instead, Reggie scooted to third, laughing as he ran. Poppie's toss came in to third on target, but Reggie kicked the ball out of Jeremy Trower's glove as he slid in. Laughing maniacally, Reggie raced for home, as Jeremy looked frantically left and right, for the loose ball.

Peter crouched at home, blocking the plate. The toss from Jeremy arrived just as Reggie barreled to the plate. In the pile-up, Reggie's sharp cleats ripped Peter's right hand, and both players rolled away in agony.

"He's out!" Mr. Davis yelled.

Peter's cheering teammates surrounded him. He heard the crowd's roar, but his attention was fixed on a flap of meaty skin laid open at the base of his thumb. He pulled back the dirty flesh with his middle finger, before noticing Reggie lying motionless on the ground, his right shoe missing.

"You okay, Reggie? Where's your shoe?"

"I don't know," Reggie said fuzzily. The mania in his eyes was gone. "Someone must've taken it off. What just happened?"

"We collided at home plate."

Peter shook off his catcher's mitt, extending his left hand to lift Reggie from the dirt. The light from a flash bulb caught the instant.

"What's your name, son?" a reporter asked Peter. "We're going to make sure you get in the papers. I'll get this out on the wires right away."

"That's how you play baseball," a wrinkled man in a Red Sox cap declared as he shook Mike's hand. "Gripping, absolutely gripping!"

Mike sprayed the celebrating crowd with fizz from a shaken soda. Peter's dad and Commissioner Scott joined the

celebration at home plate, as Karen made her way to Peter's side and inspected his bleeding hand. Peter looked through and over the crowd for Mr. Blackthorne. He had seemingly disappeared.

"Karen, did you see that man with the hole in his throat?"

"How could I miss him? Creee-py! I just saw some men drive him away. They didn't seem like a very friendly crowd," Karen said, giving Peter back his hand. "I think you need to see a doctor right away. That's a deep puncture wound."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Peter said, examining the wound, his thoughts still on Blackthorne and Reggie. Reggie had always been a good sport. It wasn't at all like him to suddenly play dirty and slide into home plate that way, steel cleats first. It was as if he'd lost his mind.

3

U_DJUK

"C HUM," MR. MILLER CALLED UPSTAIRS , "you have a phone call. It's a girl." Peter leapt down the stairs and snatched the phone from his father, who returned to the Sunday paper and his well-worn recliner.

"Did you see yourself in the paper? You're famous," Karen reported.

"Yeah, I saw it. Geez. No one asked me."

"How does your thumb feel this morning?"

"It's okay. The doctor gave me a shot and cleaned the wound, but it's swollen and hot and hurts like anything."

"My mother has a special salve for injuries like yours."

"What's so special about it?"

"You don't want to know," Karen laughed. "The fishermen in Alaska use it on the cuts they get working with hooks and lines."

"If you think it'll help, I'm game."

"Why don't you come to my house for dinner, and let her have a look at it?"

"Dinner? Really? I don't want to make a big deal of it."

"You're what's buzzin', cuzzin'! My parents want to meet you. See you at the park swings in an hour."

Peter hung up the phone with a smile. Karen was easy to talk to. Mr. Miller pushed his black horn-rim glasses down on his nose to study Peter, before pointing to the paper.

"Isn't it amazing how fast news travels these days? A story goes out on a wire, and the next morning my son's picture is in every city and state newspaper. Things change every day, even phones are becoming commonplace. It says here that someday everyone will have their own phone."

"You mean I would have a phone with my own number? That would be incredible."

"Well, that's a little far-fetched! Can you imagine a world where every teenager has their own phone? That's real science fiction! But it's a fact that AT&T is trying to make room for more numbers. Williamsport is changing over to all-number dialing this year. No more exchange names."

Peter leaned on the recliner and read over his father's shoulder.

"It's a terrible thing about Jim Calendar and Leslie DeBrulle," Mr. Miller commented, reading an article about Miss Hanson's arrival in town. "No witnesses, and Jim's two shoes in the cemetery were the only trace found of either one of them."

Peter's skin chilled a little.

"What do you think happened, dad?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"We met that FBI lady mentioned in the paper, yesterday, before the game. I hope she finds them," Peter said. "Have you seen Oso?"

"He's in the backyard. I think he was looking for you."

Peter passed through the dining room into the kitchen, where Mrs. Miller's rolling pin spread pie crusts on the counter.

"What kind of pie do you want for dinner, Peter?

Chocolate cream or lemon meringue?"

"Lemon sounds swell, but Karen Croft from school already asked me to her house for dinner this afternoon."

"She's a nice girl. Clean up before you go over and mind your manners. I'll save you a piece of pie."

Peter opened the screen door to the back steps. Oso, a large-middling size black mutt, looked up from chasing bird shadows, and immediately tore through the lawn to kiss and lick Peter on the face, resting in the bend of his left arm.

"You see that squirrel, boy?"

The hair on the back of Oso's neck rose into a sharp edge of excitement as he awaited his master's command.

"Sic him!"

Peter released Oso's collar and he sprang forward, a black blur on the heels of the surprised squirrel, chasing it up a high pecan tree. Oso stared at the squirrel with the patient intent to stay put until it came down.

"Come on boy, we'll get him next time," Peter said, holding open the screen.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Mrs. Miller protested. "Oso's a good dog and you're teaching him bad habits."

"Teaching him to sic isn't bad. He likes it."

Mrs. Miller patted and stroked Oso's head, breaking off a half slice of bacon and dropping it to him. Peter took a piece of bacon from the small pile, and Mrs. Miller swatted his hand with the rolled end of a dishtowel.

"The bacon is for sandwiches, Peter. I have half a mind to trade you in for a horse. It would save on our food budget."

Upstairs, Peter tossed his tee shirt and jeans aside and put on clean clothes. He sensed something missing. His sports trophies stood in a line above his study desk. The duffel bag lay on the floor. New York Yankee and Penn State banners hung loosely above his dresser. Baseball cards in shoe boxes, an air rifle and boxing gloves covered the floor of his closet.

Peter suddenly remembered he'd left his lucky white rabbit's foot in the pocket of the jeans he'd just thrown down. His right hand getting cut open in the game had been an unlucky mishap, and that morning he'd decided to start carrying his rabbit's foot again. Peter was prone to superstition, and a vague edginess was growing inside him. A sense of calm returned as he slid the charm into his front pocket.

Composed and intact, Peter headed to Brandon Park, where he sat in the swings, waiting for Karen. Momentarily,

he picked her out in the distance, coming through the tall grass of a long sloping hill. The slant sunlight washed through her thin cotton print dress, shadows and light playing on and across her scissoring legs. Her shoulder length brown hair bounced mischievously as she picked up her pace to greet him.

Karen was dependable, patient and kind. Having a lab partner like her made Chemistry tolerable, and her smarts often bailed Peter out. Karen didn't fool around in school. She was just the kind of lab partner any guy would want. If you set up an experiment with Karen, you were guaranteed an 'A'. Of course she always insisted you work as hard as she did. No goofing off. Peter waved to her with his bandaged hand.

Karen thought Peter looked solidly and crisply handsome. At school he wore pressed cotton trousers and a collared sports shirt, never challenging the school dress code. He was her type. He wasn't a goody-goody; he was strong and quietly confident and he didn't really care if others thought he was a square in his cleanly pressed clothes. Thinking about Peter inevitably led Karen to consider Mike DeSorcier, Peter's best and inseparable friend. In their partnership, it was Mike's job to be the nonconformist, to wear his shirts open in front, or untucked in denim dungarees, with rolled-up cuffs that irritated authority.

"My parents are looking forward to meeting you, Peter,"

Karen disclosed, gravitating into his orbit, taking up his unbandaged hand in hers. "My mom's always saying what a nice young man you are, polite and *so* athletic."

Peter blushed, but Karen continued singing his praises. She imitated him by flexing her muscles comically.

"My mom's already sized you up. She's right about people most of the time. By the way, she was at the game, and I asked her opinion of Mr. Blackthorne. She said to be careful with him. Her impression was that he might not really be a man, at all."

"Does she mean he's like that creature from '*X-The Unknown*', the one that absorbs people's energy and leaves them burned-out husks?"

"Peter, don't believe it, it might still be true. Movie writers get their ideas from things they've seen and heard. If you've seen something in the movies, it probably exists.

Powerful people keep a lot of secrets hidden from normal people like us, and they do it through the press and entertainment. They capture our imagination and use it to create the kind of world they want for themselves, and it's not the same one you or I might want. My advice is to trust what my mom says."

"I've got nothing to worry about. I've started keeping my rabbit's foot on me again, for a lucky charm," Peter smiled. "It saved my life once. I was hiking along a steep cliff, and I slipped and caught hold of a bush growing from the rock face. I was a goner without it."

"That rabbit's foot didn't save your life!" Karen laughed. "You and your Father in Heaven, working together, saved your life. The rabbit's foot didn't put the bush there or grab it for you, but if you're really set on having something that gives you a confidence boost, maybe I can help you out. We'll see when we get to my house."

They arrived at Karen's two-story red brick house, with a spreading maple shading the front porch. Inside, Karen directed Peter to a large green couch, leaving him alone while she went in search of her parents. He liked the inviting and calming space.

This was the first time Peter had spent any time alone with Karen outside of school. He hadn't expected that she would have any opinions at all on spooky matters. Whenever they talked in class it was about beakers and Bunsen burners and projects due. The fact that she spoke openly about mysterious things intrigued him. She was unusual and interesting, but also honest and thoughtful. Peter supposed that he sometimes came off as goofy or simple-minded, because in their conversations he was usually a beat or two behind her, and he asked a lot of questions.

Karen's front room was decorated with carved wooden masks, painted in bright colors. The wood was dry and cracked, and the oval eyes of the masks stared back at him without the least interest.

"Those masks represent my ancestors."

Mrs. Croft's voice startled Peter. She stood in the arched entrance to the dining room, the light behind making it difficult to see her clearly. Peter could tell she had dark shoulder-length hair like Karen's, and she was tall and graceful in her movements.

"Do you like the masks?"

"They're pretty cool. Where do they come from?"

"We brought them with us when we moved to Williamsport. Karen has Inuit ancestors in Alaska and Scottish ancestors from the Williamsport area. The Croft family opened the first filling station in this area in 1912."

Karen caught Peter's attention from behind her mother, motioning him to follow her, with a backwards tilt of her head.

"Peter, why don't we go up to my room?"

Weighing equal amounts of calm and shock, Peter followed Karen upstairs to her bedroom. When she shut the door he could hardly see. Never having been alone with a girl in her bedroom, he didn't know what to expect.

"It's okay, Peter," Karen said, seeming to read his mind. "I already asked and I'm allowed to have friends in my room."

His eyes gradually adjusted to the low light, as he studied a gray mask on her wall. It had tattoo lines carved in its cheeks and bore a resemblance to a laughing dog, with a snout and pink-lined pointed ears.

"His name is Takipok," Karen said, again answering his

unasked question. "He has protective powers, better than your rabbit's foot, but a mask isn't the right protection for you. Sometimes masks are used negatively to make people anonymous and take away their power, but I'm going to give you something very positive and very powerful."

Karen pulled an object from her pocket and handed it to Peter. It was a smooth stone carving of a seal lying on its side with a raised flipper.

"This is Udjuk, an Inuit word that means 'Big Seal'. My grandfather calls him 'The Seal of Approval'. He gave Udjuk to me, to help me make good decisions. Since you're worried about trouble, I'll loan him to you for protection, if you two get along."

The small eyes of the carved seal glowed dimly green in the half-light. The carving was interesting, but hardly remarkable. A lucky rabbit's foot made sense. Luck was a real thing, but a stone that could help you make decisions was a little kooky.

"How can a stone help you make decisions?"

"Udjuk moves."

Needles prickled up Peter's spine.

"What do you mean *Udjuk moves*?" Peter asked, examining the carving more closely. "It's a rock, isn't it? Rocks don't move."

"Udjuk doesn't move often, but if you ask him a reasonable question he'll move if the answer is yes. If he doesn't move the answer is no. For instance, I asked him

about helping you and he moved."

"What else did you ask him about me?"

"I asked him if you could be trusted. He'll only answer important questions. He doesn't like silly ones. Udjuk was very active in his movement and he seems happy to work with you, but he comes with a word of warning. You might start having vivid dreams, and lots of them. Udjuk opens up the dream world."

"He seems like a good guy," Peter said, inspecting Udjuk. Scattered pinpricks of phosphorescent light glittered on his smooth surface. "What makes him glow?"

"Radium," Karen said simply. "Now that Udjuk has befriended you, I'll ask my grandfather if you can keep him for a while. Hold Udjuk with your good hand while I unwrap your bandage."

Karen unwrapped Peter's bandage and found his wounded thumb swollen and red.

"The wound needs to have the poison drawn out. We'll wash it, soak it and coat it with salve before we wrap it back up," Karen said, as she left the room to gather bandaging supplies.

Peter asked Udjuk dozens of questions while Karen was out of the room, but Udjuk only looked at him with his soft green eyes, not moving a whit. When Karen returned she cleaned Peter's wound, while they talked about the end of the school year and the upcoming talent show.

Karen was the stage manager for the show, sponsored by

the sophomores. She wasn't certain Peter would agree to help, because she'd noticed he was never present when volunteers were needed, but today he was her captive.

"You won't be able to do much, because of your hand, but I think you can help by handling one set of curtains."

She dried the wound and slathered salve on before wrapping it up with a clean bandage. "Clean it every day and put a new coat of salve on with a new wrap. Hold it up like your doctor said, and at the end of the week it'll be better."

"Thanks, Doctor Croft."

Karen turned shyly away as she cleaned up, so that Peter wouldn't see the blush rising from her chest and throat into her cheeks.

"I'd like to be a doctor, but I'm not sure what kind yet."

"Why not a witch doctor?" Peter suggested with a grin.

"I know you're teasing me, but it felt good to be called Dr. Croft. Do you have any plans this summer?" she asked, casually changing the subject.

"My family's going to the shore in late August. We always stay at the same cottages near the beach."

"I've never seen the ocean," Karen said sadly.

"Really? Maybe you can come with us, and share a room with my sister Janice."

"That sounds fun," Karen agreed, hesitating to say more. Peter's sudden and unexpected invitation excited and worried her, for a reason she didn't want to share.

Peter wondered what Karen meant by 'that sounds fun'. Was that a 'no', or a 'yes', or a 'maybe'? It was always fun to have a friend along. He and Janice were each allowed to invite one friend on their annual beach vacation.

Downstairs, Karen's father called them to dinner. Peter sat next to Karen, and Mr. Croft set out plates of ham and bowls of macaroni. Peter enjoyed learning about Alaska and Karen's family history. Mrs. Croft brought up the subject of Udjuk.

"Did Karen introduce you to Udjuk?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I have him in my pocket right now."

"Have you asked him a question yet?"

"Yes, ma'am, but no answers. Karen told me he moves if the answer is yes, but he doesn't answer dumb questions. Maybe my questions are dumb."

"Most of our answers are already inside us, and if that's the case, he won't do your thinking for you. And he won't give you answers that would lend you an unfair advantage over others. No one knows how long he's been in our tribe. The shamans in our village have passed him down for many years."

"What's a shaman?" Peter asked.

"A shaman is a tribal priest or healer, a teacher. They communicate with the One Great Spirit, our Source, our Father in Heaven, to help others. My father, Ataninnuaq, is the shaman of our tribe. The shaman who taught Ataninnuaq, passed Udjuk on to him over fifty years ago."

Ataninnuaq passed Udjuk to Karen, and now Karen is passing him to you."

"Wow, Udjuk is ancient," Peter said with awe.

"I think Udjuk operates like the relay transmitters we had in the army, Chum," Mr. Croft said. "He picks up signals and relays them back to you. I think it's got something to do with the radium in him. I had a hard time with these Inuit beliefs, until I met Ataninnuaq, Karen's grandfather. He's the real deal, a Christian and a shaman. The salve Karen put on your thumb I won't vouch for. I know some of the ingredients in it, and *pee-yew* is all I can say."

"What's in it?" Peter asked.

"Let's just say you should avoid any snow colored yellow by it," Mr. Croft laughed.

"He means caribou urine," Mrs. Croft said.

"Well, let's call Ataninnuaq and let Chum get home," Mr. Croft said. "It'll be about eleven in the morning, in Alaska, not that it matters in the summer, it's light there almost all the time now."

Mr. Croft dialed the operator and gave her the number to call. He greeted Ataninnuaq in the Inuit language before passing the phone to his wife who passed it to Karen. She handed the phone to Peter.

"Hello, Peter, how are you?"

"I'm fine, sir, and you?"

"I am in good health. My granddaughter calls you Peter, but may I call you by your nickname – Chumbucket?"

"Yes sir, that's what my teammates call me, or Chum."

"Fine. In Alaska, we catch the big fish with chum buckets, but you catch baseballs," Ataninnuaq said easily. "In baseball, I follow the Cleveland Indians, but I think this will be Bob Feller's last season. He's an old man, like me. I don't think they can beat the Yankees in their division, what do you think?"

"No sir. They can't beat the Yankees, not with Mickey Mantle healthy."

"It's as I thought. There's little hope for Cleveland."

"I don't think anyone can beat the Yankees, sir."

"Even when there is no hope, one does not give up. I will continue to root for Cleveland."

"Yes, sir."

"My granddaughter tells me she wants to loan Udjuk to you. What do you think of him?"

"He's cool. I didn't know he was so old."

"He's very old, but his heart is young. Udjuk is mischievous and he loves to play, and so he easily defeats his enemies. Do you think you would like to keep Udjuk for a while?"

"Sure, but I know he's important to you."

"You must give me something important in exchange for Udjuk. What is your most valued possession?"

Peter thought deeply for a moment. It occurred to him that of all things he owned his most valuable possession was his 1952 Mickey Mantle rookie season baseball card. It was

rare and already worth ten bucks. With that thought, something like a small animal wiggled in his pocket, shocking him up from the table in amazement.

"What was that?" he yelled, tossing the phone to a startled Karen, and scrambling to dig out Udjuk.

"My grandfather is laughing," Karen said, returning the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

Peter put the phone to his ear, and heard Ataninnuaq laughing loudly.

"Udjuk didn't mean to shock you, but that's what he does. What were you thinking, when he agreed with you?"

"I was thinking that my most valuable possession is my Mickey Mantle rookie card. It's a rare collectible and it's already worth some change."

"Okay, then that's it. You give your Mickey Mantle card to Karen, and she will give you Udjuk. This is a real major league deal, don't you think?"

"Sure is. I guess Udjuk really works."

"No, he is like Mickey Mantle, he really plays. It's a good trade. Keep care of him, and remember whatever happens to Udjuk happens to Mickey. Prize him as you do Mickey."

"Yes, sir. I'll take good care of him."

"It has been good to talk with you, Chum. Call me anytime. Karen has my number. Don't call collect, because I'm a poor fisherman. Good night. We'll be talking again soon, I'm sure. I see lots of fireworks headed your way.

Please give Karen the phone so I can say good night to

my family. Bye now."

At the door, Karen held Peter's hands and touched her nose to his.

"Touching noses is the Inuit way to say hello and goodbye," she said.

They were silent a moment together.

"I want to tell you something you might think is silly," Karen said, "but the last time we spoke my grandfather told me I should stay out of water this summer, especially late in the summer, and when the moon is waxing or full. Your invitation to the shore in August is tempting, but it worries me."

"Why? How can he know what's going to happen? You can swim, right?"

"I'm a good swimmer, but Ataninnuaq's spiritual vision is always potent. When he gives advice, it should be taken. He sees certain danger for me around water, but the circumstances, the day, the hour are hard to see. I shouldn't go in water above my knees until summer ends."

"I understand. I'm superstitious, too."

"It's not superstition, Peter. It's serious. So if you'll tell me more about your invitation to the shore, I can decide. Would I be staying with your younger sister in a room? What would I be responsible to contribute or bring? Would you tease me if I didn't go in the water?"

"Yes, you would sleep in a room with Janice. Just bring yourself and whatever you need or want, in a small bag. We

take care of everything else. I wouldn't tease you."

"Well, it sounds fun and, like I said, I've never seen the shore. If your invitation is genuine, will you ask your parents first? I'll ask my parents if your parents say okay."

"Sure, I think it'll be fun. We do it every year, and we have different guests. It's no big deal. I'll let you know."

"Okay, then. See you at the talent show, right?"

"Right. Hang loose, mongoose," Peter said.

He strolled home in the twilight, deep in thought. Approaching Cherry Street, Peter recognized Trina Hudgins, a classmate from school, leaning inside the driver's side window of a black DeSoto, talking to the men inside. Something about the situation struck him as wrong, and Udjuk suddenly and unmistakably turned over in his pocket. Trina looked up when Peter yelled in surprise, and the idling DeSoto screeched away. Trina was relieved to see him.

"Peter! The creepiest thing just happened. I saw Jim Calendar in that car, but he wouldn't answer me when I recognized him in the back seat. The men in the car were saying some awful things to me. Will you walk me home?"

A chilly uneasiness clung to Peter as he escorted Trina to her house. Williamsport was changing into a town he no longer recognized. Fear and suspicion were alive and infesting its streets and parks. The safe and sleepy town he'd grown up in was vanishing in front of his eyes. Strangers lurked in the dusk, and kids were vanishing without a trace.

The Summer Set

4

THE TALENT SHOW

MARGARET MUNRO, JO'S MOTHER, WAVED from the black DeSoto's passenger window as it slowed to the curb. She called to Peter and Mike, walking on the nearby sidewalk. "If you're going to the talent show you'll be late. We can give you a ride."

"No, thanks, Mrs. Munro. We'll just make it," Mike answered.

The driver of the DeSoto stuck a lit cigarette between his lips, and leaned over behind Mrs. Munro, to lift the rear door handle.

"Pile in, guys. I insist. It's hot as Hades out there, but we've got Chrysler Airtemp air conditioning in here."

Mike and Peter exchanged glances. Peter shrugged his shoulders, and they slid into the back seat.

"Name's Ted Whitson," the driver said, with a crooked smile, turning the radio down and slipping the car into drive.

"Ted, this is Mike and this is Peter," Mrs. Munro said. "They're two of Jo's friends."

"Where's Jo?" Mike asked quickly, his eyes narrowing in

an obvious distaste for Whitson.

"She rode with Cindy and her parents," Mrs. Munro answered. "Have you young men made any plans for the summer?"

"Not really," Peter answered. "The baseball tournament season starts soon."

"Baseball!" Mr. Whitson said, slapping the steering wheel enthusiastically. "What a great sport for our Homeland. Builds strong minds and bodies. Useful bodies."

Another minute passed before Whitson lit a new cigarette and started up again.

"You guys might not know, but I own Whitson Funeral Home. Lock, stock and barrel. I've been thinking that I could use some help at the parlor - sweeping up, dusting and general cleaning. Interested? I don't need an answer now, but come by and see me. It's a great business. People are dying to get in!" he cackled.

"Ted, I've told you, I don't think jokes about death are funny," Mrs. Munro protested.

"You're right, Margaret. Death is serious business. But speaking of something that is funny, wasn't it some funny business about those two teens disappearing? Weren't they classmates of yours?"

"Ted, stop it," Mrs. Munro said. "I'm sure they're both just worried sick about Jim and Leslie. I know Jo is."

When the DeSoto pulled in at the high school's front entrance, Mike and Peter exited quickly.

"Think about my offer," Mr. Whitson shouted as they hurried away. "It would be great to have you two around the shop."

"We'll do that," Mike said. "Bye, Mrs. Munro."

Mike lowered his voice as they slipped along the wall to the rear entrance.

"Whitson's probably the reason Jo rode with Cindy. She thinks he's creepy."

Inside the auditorium, Mike and Peter looked for Karen among the students weaving through the props backstage. They finally found her at the heavy velvet curtains, peeking out at the audience. Mike cleared his throat, and she turned around.

"Finally," Karen smiled. "You guys had me worried. Mike you've got to get ready for your act, and Peter I need you at the ropes."

"Have you seen Jo?" Mike asked. "She's the one you should be worried about. I hope everyone's ready for her act."

"What about Jo's act?" Karen asked, suddenly concerned. "Is there something I should know?"

"Here she comes," Mike answered. "Ask her."

Jo, wearing a pink cashmere sweater, sauntered towards the group, smiling at Peter before frowning at Mike.

"Ask me what?" Jo looked from one face to the next. "Mike, what have you been saying?"

"I was only saying how great you look, but now, if you'll

excuse me, I've got to get dressed for my act. Chum, give me my duds."

Peter felt through his duffel and found Mike's props, all except his magic wand. Thinking the pointer might have worked its way to the bottom, he held the bag upside down, shaking its contents out. Scads of baseballs fell out with the wand, rolling swiftly across the floor. Karen stopped one ball with her brown moccasin, while Jo's white and black saddle shoe stopped another. Karen and Jo looked up from their respective balls, into each others' eyes.

"I haven't seen your act yet, Jo," Karen said, eyeing her warily, trying to judge the situation by Jo's inconsistent reputation. "Mike said something about hoping everyone was ready for it. What did he mean?"

"Mike makes me so mad sometimes," Jo seethed, before turning to Peter for support. "Peter, you've seen my dance. What did you think?"

"When have I ever seen you dance?" Peter asked, genuinely mystified.

"Last week, when you dropped by the studio to fetch Mr. Scott to the ballpark," Jo replied, mildly crestfallen. "Didn't you notice me?"

"Oh, right. I did go by the dance studio. Umm, there were lots of girls there practicing. I'm probably not the best one to ask about dancing," Peter said, kneeling on the stage, recovering his scattered baseballs. "I've got two left feet, but I'll bet you're a great dancer."

"I could teach you," Jo suggested.

"No, really. I'm terrible. Can you guys take your shoes off my balls?"

The lights dimmed in the auditorium and a hush fell beyond the curtains.

"Oops. I better get ready. See you later," Jo smiled, specifically to Peter, before melting into the crowd backstage.

"What do you think of Jo?" Karen asked Peter.

"She's okay I guess," Peter said, his gaze following Jo into the darkness. "Did you ever notice her eyes are different colors? One is gray and the other is green. The gray one has a small spot of blood, or something, in it that never goes away. Her eyes are prettier than Elizabeth Taylor's."

Karen turned away from Peter, hiding her hurt. She accepted that she wasn't glamorous like Jo, but she'd hoped Peter wasn't the kind of guy who'd go for such a showy but unsteady girl. Well, why wouldn't he? Every guy in school 'flipped' over Jo. Karen scolded herself for expecting more from Peter, and she returned to the business at hand.

"Everyone! Line up in your spots behind the back curtains. Help each other to get dressed and ready," she commanded, before returning her attention to Peter. "Will you please take your station at the ropes, Peter?"

Peter wound his way through the crowd, to the left stage curtains. For some reason, Karen seemed sore with him. He couldn't come up with any reason for her to be sore. Maybe

she was stressed about the show starting. He decided he could help her out by holding up his end.

Trina Hudgins sidled up to Peter and smiled. Her white-gloved hands were gripping two batons at her waist.

"Hi, Peter. Thanks again, for walking me home. I'm so disappointed you aren't in the show tonight. Earlier in the year, I was going to suggest we do an act together."

Peter stared at Trina, puzzled. "Me? Baton twirling? No chance."

Trina's lips twisted before she shut them like a purse clasp. Mike appeared, in a top hat and fake mustache, to stand near Jo at the far back of the stage. The stage footlights came up for show time, just as the heavy curtains drew back, revealing Karen standing alone in the spotlight.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Kit Carson High School Talent Show. Our judges for tonight are Principal Joseph Skinner, Mrs. Rosemary Meadows - Twelfth Grade science, and Mrs. Evelyn Waters - Guidance Counselor."

Karen paused for a round of polite applause. In the rear of the auditorium, a billowing cloud of gray smoke swirled in the dead air. Her eyes stopped on Mr. Blackthorne, the tall stranger from the baseball game, smoking in the exit's dark recess.

"There's no smoking in the auditorium," Karen announced into the microphone. "Please extinguish all cigarettes."

Karen waited while Mr. Blackthorne snuffed the lit cigarette out in the palm of his hand, feeling his empty eyes intruding into her mind, searching her with whispery slimy tentacles. She stayed silent until the last curl of blue smoke exited his clenched fist.

"Thank you for your cooperation. I'm sure you're all ready to see the wonderful acts we have in store. Ida Rubenstein is up first, with an oboe recital of a selection from Ravel's '*Bolero*'!"

Backstage Karen kept her ears on Ida's performance and her eyes on the audience. Act after act entered, and exited, the stage in orderly fashion. Mike introduced himself on stage as a mentalist, '*The Great Sarno*'.

"You may not know what a mentalist is, so I'll start by telling you what I'm not," Mike began. "I'm not a psychic, like the late Edgar Cayce, nor a hypnotist, like Morey Bernstein, of *Bridey Murphy* fame. My gift is my ability to read minds." An audible gasp of disbelief rippled through the crowd. "You don't believe me? I suppose you'll want me to prove my power?"

"Yes, prove it!" a man in the front row shouted, and others quickly and loudly joined the man's challenge.

"Ah-ha, skeptics!" Mike smiled. "Very well. You, sir, will be my subject. Please stand."

Applause greeted the man in the front row as he stood. Mike beckoned him to the stage and handed him a half-dozen index cards and pencils.

"Please, sir, choose any audience members you wish, and give them each a card and pencil."

The man distributed the cards and pencils to the volunteers, before Mike gave them their task.

"Write down the name of any U.S. President, living or dead, and return it to the gentleman."

When the audience members were finished the man collected the cards, and Mike asked him to bring the cards forward. Taking them, Mike tapped the cards with his wand, held them to his forehead, and concentrated for a half-minute. He returned the cards to the man.

"Choose one card, memorize the President's name, tear up that card and then hold his name in your mind. Return the other cards to me." The man did as instructed and, when the cards were all in, Mike paused for a long moment with his eyes closed and head bowed. Then he spoke with confidence.

"Truman. The name in your mind is former president Harry S. Truman."

"That's absolutely correct!" the man shouted in amazement, and the crowd let out a pleased gasp of satisfaction, and gave Mike a round of tremendous applause.

Peter wondered if Mike could read his mind: *You're a fraud.*

Mike performed two more quick tricks, and Karen clapped as he came off stage. He returned a knowing wink.

Karen grew curious to see what kind of felony Jo would commit, and finally it was Jo's turn. Karen introduced her act.

"Jo Munro takes us on a trip to the islands with a Caribbean medley of song and dance."

Karen watched as the act opened with Jo asleep at a school desk, in front of a large blackboard on wheels, angled to the audience. A mild pink sunrise rose on a light screen behind her. Sunny calypso music rose gradually in volume, seeming to lift Jo from her seat. Jo slid off her shoes, and sailed behind the chalkboard. Her bare legs swayed beneath the board as she flung her clothes on top: her skirt, her sweater and lastly her blouse. Karen heard a low warning gabble, moving like a snake through the crowd.

Jo emerged in a green and yellow-fringed two-piece swimsuit, with her bare belly exposed, her energetic movements exciting even the bouncing fringe of her outfit. Karen's cheeks flushed. Jo pulled at the bright orange scarf holding her ponytail, it came undone and the golden waterfall of her hair spilled to her waist.

The students' delighted eyes were lost in her every movement, but the paralyzed women in the audience contracted their lips and clenched their jaws, as the men shifted uncomfortably in their seats. A realization slowly dawned on Karen that allowing Jo to continue was jeopardizing both Jo and herself.

"This needs to stop, right now!" a woman's voice cried

out, and a second voice, and then a third and fourth, joined to form a chorus. "Stop her! Stop the music! End this right now!"

Karen allowed Jo to finish her dance, and when the music had finally, thankfully, died away, Jo bolted to the girls' locker room. Karen tried to make light of the spectacle.

"Thank you, Jo. We won't soon forget that performance!"

A gaggle of women stood and angrily approached Principal Skinner and the other judges. Excitement and chaos buzzed through the auditorium. The youngest children ran wild, imitating Jo's dance, while Karen fumbled with the microphone, trying to restore order.

"We still have four acts to go," she reminded the audience.

A few people remained in their seats, but most stood and gossiped. The remaining acts looked at each other, with Karen's pleading eyes asking them to stay, but they suddenly united in their decision and left her standing alone. She signaled Peter and his counterpart to draw the curtains.

"That didn't end very well," she said to Mike and Peter.

"It's a hornet's nest out there, for sure," Mike whistled, surveying the spreading disorder.

"Principal Skinner doesn't look very happy," Peter observed.

The disappointed contestants and families filed out of the auditorium. A few minutes later, Jo slipped out from the

girls' locker room. Karen noticed smudges of wiped tears on her cheeks. Mike retrieved Jo's clothes from the abandoned chalkboard, holding them out to her.

"What did you think, Mike," Jo said, a pearl of sweat dripping from her brow, coursing down her neckline.

"Maybe a squidge too much rumba in the bumba," Mike suggested, holding his thumb and forefinger narrowly apart. "Otherwise, I think your dance was swell."

"You might be the only fan I have left," Jo said, and her smoky laughter spilled out like dice from a cup.

Principal Skinner made his way towards Jo, with her mother and Ted Whitson close behind.

"I'm surprised you're laughing, Miss Munro," Principal Skinner said. "I'm not."

"You've shamed your mother," Mr. Whitson scolded. "What a travesty!"

Jo left the stage with Principal Skinner, her mother and the stringy Mr. Whitson. An agitated crowd followed at their heels. Karen scanned the thinning crowd.

"We better get going. Can you guys bring the speakers, and I'll carry the turntable back to the office?"

Peter and Mike each lugged a bulky speaker by its leather handle, soldiering the heavy equipment down the empty hallway. The frosted glass of Principal Skinner's door obscured the angry parents surrounding his desk, but Karen caught a few of the muffled words worming their way out of the room.

The Summer Set

"Awful...delinquent...indecent..."

Mike and Peter heaved the speakers to the top of the receptionist's counter, dropping them heavily on the wood. The conversation inside the room stopped. Principal Skinner poked his head out and seeing Karen, asked her to step inside his office.

"Don't leave without me," she pleaded to Peter and Mike.
"I'll meet you out front."

5

THE ATOMIC SHAKE

PRESSING THROUGH THE EXCITED CROWD in the parking lot, Peter and Mike overheard scattered words of amusement and delight.

"Some people liked Jo's dance," Peter whispered to Mike. "I sure did."

"Did you hear that jerk Whitson acting like her father? Jo's dad would mop the street with Whitson if he caught him anywhere near Jo. Her father was a full bird colonel in the Air Force when he died in Korea. He'd probably be a lieutenant general by now. Everything was copacetic with Jo until his death, and then she completely lost interest in school. She says she's getting out of her mom's whacky house the day she turns eighteen."

"If she ever turns eighteen," Peter added.

"Yeah, I worry about her, sometimes," Mike said. "She's a little gone in the head since her dad died."

"That means something, coming from Mr. Gone-In-The-Head himself," Peter commented.

"It's just that she hasn't moved on," Mike continued,

brushing aside Peter's jab. "For a while she even tried communicating with him through a Ouija board. I did it with her a few times and we were practically having full conversations with someone she thought was her dad. I finally convinced her it was just her imagination moving the planchette around, and she put it away."

"I don't touch Ouija boards," Peter said flatly.

"There must be something to them," Mike said. "Under Jo's fingertips the planchette was flying around, spelling words faster than I could read. Little known fact, there's actually a US Patent on the Ouija board, saying it works."

"Doesn't matter. No way I'm touching one," Peter repeated.

They waited for Karen as cars loaded and honked goodnight. She exited the building a few minutes later, sitting down beside them, on the curb, dejected.

"Principal Skinner blamed me, in front of everybody, for Jo's dance. He said I should have screened all the acts for decency. I'm getting a 'C' in citizenship for this semester."

"Ol' man Skinner," Mike said. "He's moldy. Say, are you guys, hungry? I didn't have time to eat before the show. Why don't we all go to the Atomic Shake?"

"I only have twenty cents," Karen said. "How much is a single-dip vanilla cone?"

"Maybe we can all pitch in for a banana split and eat it together," Mike suggested. "How much moola do you have on you, Chum?"

"A dollar and some change."

"Well, then, ain't we in Fat City? Atomic Shake here we come!"

A night breeze played with Karen's soft hair as they strolled to the diner. In all of her school activities Karen worked extra hard to be a role model, and the sting of receiving a poor mark in citizenship was especially galling. When her family first moved to Pennsylvania, Karen had wondered if she would ever fit in, and even after four years in Williamsport she still occasionally felt like an outsider.

"Karen, did you hear anything in Skinner's office about Jo?" Mike asked, and his sudden question snapped Karen back into the present. It took her a moment to collect her thoughts.

"Oh, Jo's expelled for the rest of the school year," she answered, still feeling a little guilty for not preventing the trouble.

"Wow!" Mike whistled. "She's not going to take that well. She might really drop out of school."

"Really? Why would she do that?" Karen asked.

"Jo's got a temper. She's a nice girl, but when she gets something in her head, it doesn't matter what anyone else says or does," Mike said. "There's no stopping her... Halt!" Mike suddenly threw out his arms. "We're walking on sacred ground."

"Oh, no, not Hunga, again," Peter groaned.

"Who's Hunga?" Karen asked.

"Hunga's a fire god we worshiped years ago," Mike answered, and then he elaborated without anyone's additional request. "Our temple was right here," he pointed to a gigantic mound of rubble in a nearby vacant lot. "In a concrete storage bunker the army abandoned after the war, a deep underground military base. We danced around bonfires and chanted 'Hun-Ga! Hun-Ga! Hun-Ga!' Our shadows would become monstrous in the firelight against the bunker's walls."

"Mike loves fire," Peter chimed in. "He's the one who created Hunga, and I just went along with him. I want to be clear - I'm not a Hunga worshiper and I never was one."

I don't think there was anyone but Mike who was a genuine worshiper of Hunga. Come to think of it, there never was any such god until Mike invented him, so that he could hold the ceremonies. He recruited everybody and he always brought all the matches, candles and fireworks."

"At first there were only four or five of us," Mike explained, his eyes gleaming, even in the darkness. "And then Jo became the Hunga priestess!" he exulted. "The membership exploded. My mistake was to let Jeremy Trower join, and he ratted us out to his parents. The Fink! The town held a meeting, voted to fill in the bunker with rubble, and now we only acknowledge Hunga on July Fourth."

Mike first, and then Peter, comically stamped their feet in rhythm to Mike's chant, 'Hun-Ga! Hun-Ga! Hun-Ga!'.

Karen soon hooked elbows with them to join in a primitive circular dance of fun and laughter, before they broke up their circle and continued on to the diner.

"I like your 'Hunga' story," Karen said. "It reminds me of when our families would sit around a fire in our tribal meeting hall, listening to my grandfather's stories."

The trio stopped at the corner of Church Street and Williams Avenue waiting for a car to pass; it pulled over and stopped, extinguishing its lights. The rear doors opened and two men in black suits emerged.

"Let's agitate the gravel," Mike said, seizing Karen's hand and towing her across the street as he ran, leaving Peter to fend for himself. Three blocks further on they raced across the highway to the burger stand, arriving out of breath and pale-faced, troubled by a growing awareness that their suspicions of being watched and followed might be grounded in reality.

"Those were the same men who drove Mr. Blackthorne away, after the game," Karen reported breathlessly. "I'm sure of it. I have a good memory for things like that. Do you think they were going to try and grab us? I saw Mr. Blackthorne again at the show tonight. He seems zeroed in on you, Peter. What do you think he wants?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Peter answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"You mean the tall creep who smokes through his throat hole?" Mike asked. "His name's Blackthorne? I overheard

that FBI lady mention him after the game. She was asking Rocket if he'd seen Blackthorne hanging around the ballpark."

"I think if we ignore him, he'll ignore us," Peter mumbled without conviction.

"Probably true. All I know for sure is that I'm hungry," Mike said, spilling out his change on an outside table. "Chum, you have the most money. You cover what we can't. Let's order."

At the counter, Peter drummed his coins on his dollar bill, looking over the menu. Conrad Bolger, a senior at the Catholic high school, opened the serving window and leaned over his order pad, pen in hand. Conrad was an unhappy soul with a bad case of acne.

"Whaddya want?"

"I want an egg sandwich," Peter said. "I like breakfast for dinner."

"We close the breakfast menu at night," Conrad snarled.

"Okay, I'll take a chocolate malted, extra malt."

Peter surrendered his dollar, giving the change he had left to Mike and Karen.

"I want a split, with extra nuts," Mike ordered. "What do you want, Karen?"

"I'll stick with a small vanilla cone."

Conrad turned wordlessly back to the dairy bar. Mike led the group back to the table.

"Pretty neat trick with that mind-reading, Mike," Peter

said. "How'd you do it?"

"Chum, have you ever known me to tell the secret to any of my magic?"

"How about that guy you mentioned at the show, what was his secret?"

"Bernstein? No secret. He hypnotized a lady at a dinner party, and she started acting like some woman named Bridey Murphy who lived in 1850, in Ireland. Supposedly, it was a past life. He wrote a book, and the story was in all the papers and magazines. I learned about Cayce in the book. He was a real psychic."

"My mom's an intuitive, and so is my grandfather," Karen said. "So am I, a little. It runs in my family."

"What's an intuitive?" Peter asked.

"It's someone who knows things by using their sixth sense," Karen explained, "like what's the right thing to do in a bad situation, or where to find something lost, how to judge people's character, things like that."

"Would someone knowing whether a coin toss will be heads or tails be an intuitive?" Peter asked. "I knew this guy who could call coin tosses if he really concentrated. I saw him do it eight times in a row, and then he said he couldn't do it anymore because he lost his concentration."

"Maybe he was using magnets to control the quarter as it flipped in the air," Mike said.

"You never lack for ideas, do you, Mike?" Karen commented.

"You should watch Mike during the game shows," Peter smiled. "Put him in a booth on *Twenty-One* and he would win easily."

"I'd like to give *Twenty-One* a try," Mike said. "Some of those guys have won fifty grand."

"No table service, punks!" Conrad yelled from the service counter. "Come up and get your stuff."

"You could be more polite to your customers, Conrad," Mike said, picking up their order at the counter. There was a history of bad blood between the two of them, and Conrad's lips drew themselves into a thin colorless line.

"You're just lucky I'm behind this counter, DeSorcier," Conrad spat, "cause anywhere else I'd flatten your nose."

"Conrad, look into a mirror sometime. Even with a flat nose my face will look better than the mug you'll see staring at you."

When Mike returned to the table, the conversation between Peter and Karen suddenly went dead.

"What's up? You guys keeping something from me?"

They started in on their desserts without answering, Karen licking her cone and Peter spooning his malt.

"I'm not going to stop asking, so you better just spill it," Mike said.

"Karen's making me promise not to tell," Peter said.

"You can say anything you want, Peter," Karen said, a little irritated. "But Udjuk might not like it."

"Who's Udjuk?" Mike asked.

"He's a magic rock Karen gave me, as protection from evil."

"A magic rock?" Mike repeated with interest. "What kind of magic?"

"He moves."

"A rock that moves? Man, you guys are nuts," Mike laughed. "I'll have to see that rock to believe it."

"Udjuk doesn't like attention," Karen said crossly, casting an accusing glance at Peter.

"Well, I keep my own protection near at hand," Mike said, lifting his right leg to the table and rolling it to the side, to display twin rawhide thongs strapping a large knife in its sheath to his calf. He brought his leg down. "Your magic rock can't be any real protection. It probably moves because it's hollowed out, with a Mexican jumping bean inside." Karen didn't counter Mike's jab. He fiddled in his pocket and removed a golden jeweled ring, which he pushed towards her. "You seem to know things, Karen. What do you think of the stone in this ring, is it a real ruby or not?"

"It's beautiful," Karen said, picking up the over-sized ring, and sliding it over her thumb. "I think it's real. It's so clear. Where did you get it?"

"It's one of those rings the Blackthorne Youth is giving out," Mike said. "Some men dropped it by the house for my brother, Doug, just as I was leaving for the Talent Show. You can wear it a while, but I need it back."

"Look at it in the moonlight," Karen exclaimed,

marveling at the stone glowing in the bright full moon. She nibbled on her cone while Mike spooned the last liquid remains of his split, and Peter slurped malt from the bottom of his glass. Finished, they headed home, crossing the highway separating The Atomic Shake from their neighborhoods. Mike held out his open hand for Karen to return the ring.

"Can I wear it a bit longer?" Karen pleaded, buying time, hoping that somehow she'd later convince Mike to let her keep it overnight. She could almost glimpse hidden mysteries through the stone - destinies, the past, the future - her intuitive spirit filled with slant impressions that tugged her senses into a land of shadows and filmy shades.

"Okay, but I really need it back. Doug's been expecting it, and he'll throw a hissy fit if he finds out I let anyone touch it."

"You'll have it back, but let me wear it home," Karen insisted. She suddenly shuddered and goose-flesh broke out on her arms despite the warm air. "That was weird. I got a sudden chill and I feel dizzy. I need to sit down."

Karen plopped down on a low wall by the sidewalk, to settle herself. Peter and Mike waited and discussed Mr. Blackthorne and the group surrounding him.

"Maybe we should go see that FBI lady, like she suggested," Mike said. "It'll give us an excuse to see the inside of an FBI office, ask a few questions, and learn something about Jim and Leslie."

"Not interested. I think we should stay out of it," Peter cautioned.

"Why not? What else is going on around here? Nothing ever happens in this town," Mike lamented.

"Mike," Karen interrupted, "will you take this ring off me? I can't do it myself. I think it's stuck."

Mike bent down and fiddled with the ring, rotating it from side-to-side. Karen stopped him.

"I'm fine, I'm okay. I don't know why I wanted it off. You can leave it on," Karen said, standing up, shaking and trembling. "This stone is a powerful totem, please take it."

Mike tried again to remove the ring, and Karen brushed his hands away.

"Mike, I'm okay, just let me wear it until I get home."

"Chum, come hold her hands so I can get this thing off of her. She won't let me take it."

Peter held Karen's hands while Mike slid the ring free. Karen began to cry.

"Oh, that was awful. I know it sounds crazy, but I heard voices, like people whispering at a funeral, full of sorrow. A voice was trying to convince me to keep the ring on."

"Well, Doug's certainly not sensitive or intuitive," Mike said, returning the ring to his pocket. "If anyone tries to talk to him through the stone, they'll be the ones who are sorry."

The young men escorted Karen to her house on Maple, saying goodnight at the curb.

"Thanks for inviting me along tonight," Karen said. "You

guys be careful the rest of the way."

"See you later, alligator."

"After a while, crocodiles," Karen smiled and waved good-bye. With Karen absent, Mike returned to the dropped discussion about Udjuk, as they headed home.

"So how does Karen's rock protect you?"

"She says Udjuk can help you know who's good and who's evil, and what's right and wrong."

"Really? Say, let me see the rock."

"I don't have it with me," Peter lied. "Let's talk about something else. School's almost out."

"Yep, and we've got the whole summer ahead of us.

Are you going to the Jersey shore again this year?"

"Yeah, the week before Labor Day, like always."

"My dad's not planning anything for us."

Mike had been Peter's vacation guest many previous summers, but Peter intended to honor his invitation to Karen, and decided to come clean about the situation.

"I was over at Karen's house and somehow, when we were talking, I invited her. I haven't even asked my parents about her going yet, but I think it would be fun if both you and she could go. Maybe I can talk Janice into using her invitation for Karen, and you can be my guest."

"You invited Karen and she said yes? Man, you're smooth as apple butter."

"Karen's just a friend, you know that. She's never been to the shore, so she wants to go."

"I'll bet. Chum and Karen sitting by the sea...," Mike sang.

"Stop it," Peter punched Mike's arm.

"Ow! Lay off. That's my pitching arm," Mike protested, rubbing his bicep. "Really, what do you think about Karen?"

"She's swell. She's super frosted about being kicked off the honor roll. What about Jo? Do you think she'll really drop out?"

"Nah, but I'm sure she'll be grounded. We should sneak over for a visit and keep her company, if it happens."

"Jo's too spooky for me," Peter declared. "I don't know her as well as you do. Your families went to all the American Legion events together."

"True, but it's not as cozy as you might think. My dad was military police and her dad was an officer. She lives on Millionaire's Row and I'm from the alleys, and that's the way of things."

"See? Maybe that's why she's so spooky to me. She's upper crust."

"Fly over with me, anyway. What harm can it do?"

"Are you sure she wouldn't mind?"

"Absolutely sure," Mike said. "Jo likes you, but don't get any ideas, buddy-boy. Dibs are mine."

6

THE ATTIC

RECALLING HIS TRADE DEAL WITH Karen and Ataninuaq when he woke the next morning, Peter emptied a biscuit tin of coins and laid the Mickey Mantle baseball card reverently inside the tin.

Downstairs, he wolfed cereal and soaked his hand, while watching TV with Janice, who howled with laughter when the puppet Mr. Moose dropped ping-pong balls on Captain Kangaroo's unsuspecting head.

"He falls for the same trick every time," she said gleefully.

"Mr. Moose is too smart for him," Peter observed, moving to the kitchen with his empty cereal bowl. His mother looked at him disapprovingly as he dropped it in the sink.

"Rinse the bowl, please. I'm not your slave."

Peter rinsed the bowl, before opening Karen's salve jar, and slathering the goo on his wound.

"Let me look at your hand. What are you putting on it?"

"It's something Karen gave me. She says it'll heal faster."

"Well, it does look better," she agreed, wrapping his hand with a roll of gauze. "You're taking good care of it. I know your throwing hand is important to you. I'll get some more rolls of gauze today."

The phone rang. It was Mike on the other end, urging Peter to meet him at the corner.

"I've got news," Mike said. "I'll tell you on the way."

Grabbing his lunch, Peter yelled a hasty good-bye as he dashed out the door. At the corner, Mike greeted him with excitement.

"News flash! They're choosing the All-Star team at a meeting tonight."

"How d'ya know?"

"That's the word, bird. The meeting is tonight at the town hall. I took a phone message from a guy who wants my dad to bring a list of all the players in the league. I know the town hall layout. We can look down from the attic and listen in."

"Nix on that, Mike. Spying doesn't sound like a great idea."

"Knowing who's on the team might give us two extra weeks to practice before the series."

"If we're caught, we're done for."

"No worries. Why don't I stay over at your house tonight? We'll head to the town hall after classes to scope everything out, and head back after supper."

"Something tells me this is bad business," Peter said

slowly.

Near the high school, Peter picked Karen out in a crowd and caught up with her at her locker, handing her the biscuit tin.

"How's Udjuk?" she asked, quickly burying the tin in her book bag.

"He's fine, He's in my pocket right now. I've asked him a million questions, but I haven't gotten a single answer."

"He's not a genie, Peter. Maybe you should carry around a Magic Eight Ball to get the answers to all your little questions."

"Boy, I hope this deal isn't a gyp. Take care of my baseball card. It's a collectible worth ten bucks."

"I will. See you around."

During lunch hour, Mike refined their spy mission. Peter would tell his parents they were going to an Atomic Shake ice cream social, to cover the time they were gone. At four o'clock Peter stood outside the town hall, waiting while Mike slid confidently inside. Five minutes later, Mike returned wearing a grin.

"We've got it made in the shade," he announced. "Everything's cool. We should bring a flashlight and pencil and paper to write down the names of the All-Stars."

Peter squirmed uneasily in his chair at dinner that evening, only responding 'yes' and 'no' to his parents' direct questions. His nervous stomach wouldn't allow him to eat more than a half fork of food at a time.

"Would you like some more beans and weenies, Mike?" Mrs. Miller asked.

"No, ma'am, they're really good and all, but I'm full. I might have some more potato salad, though."

"Hand me your plate, Mike. That doesn't make much sense, you know. You're full, but you want more potato salad," Mr. Miller observed.

"Well, okay, more beans and weenies. They're very good. Yum. What's your recipe, Mrs. Miller? For the beans and weenies, I mean."

"It's really easy. I just cut up hot dogs, pour in Van Camp's beans and heat them in the skillet. I add a few spices."

"They're really good," Mike said with a smile, before glaring at Peter over his umpteenth spoon of beans. Peter was delinquent in his duties. The master plan had called for them to leave the house ten minutes prior.

"Mike and I were wondering if we could head over to the Atomic Shake after dinner."

"That's a great idea," Mr. Miller said. "Why don't we all get in the Bel Air and go for sundaes?"

Peter paled, looking over to Mike in panic, forcing him to intervene.

"Thanks for offering, Mr. Miller, but actually it's a school thing. A group is planning to meet and celebrate the end of the year. We kinda hoped we could stay late and hang out."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'd like to hang out with the cool kids

too, but if I'm not invited I guess I'm not. How late were you guys thinking?"

"Ten-thirty?" Mike said.

"Ten-thirty is pretty late, with everything that's going on. How about ten?"

"That's fine, thanks, dad."

"We have a gentleman's agreement, then. Finish your dinner before you head out."

Peter finished in three large quick mouthfuls as Mike scooped up his beans and potatoes. They rinsed their plates in the sink, placing them in the drain rack, before excusing themselves.

"Wish we had my motorbike," Mike said, as they hurried down the street. "We're going to get there late."

Ten minutes later they arrived at the Town Hall. Yellow lights shone from the second floor windows. Peter followed Mike to the back of the brick building. From the ground, he looked up at two levels of exposed metal fire escape.

"Let's go," Mike said.

Peter's legs turned to lead as he followed Mike up the fire escape. At the top of the steel mesh platform, Mike cautiously turned the knob he'd unlocked earlier that afternoon, and peeked inside.

"All clear. You stand here and hold while I check the door to the attic."

Mike tried a door to the left, opening it without a sound, before waving Peter forward. Peter cautiously closed the

fire escape door, before following Mike up a small set of eight wooden steps, leading to a shadowy attic.

"What if someone locks the door behind us?" Peter asked.

"I can unlock and lock it from the inside," Mike said in a hushed voice, reopening the door and demonstrating the mechanism to Peter. "Pushing this button locks and unlocks the door from the inside. It's so you can't get locked in. By the way, do you have the flashlight?"

"Flashlight? We didn't bring a flashlight," Peter hissed. "We didn't bring any paper or pencils either, because you were in too much of a hurry to get out."

"You failed in your duty, Chum. Your house, your flashlight. You beat around the bush so long at dinner that we lost any prep time."

"Well, now what? We can't go back and get one."

"My matches are no use, they burn out too quickly.

Let's head up the stairs and see what we can find."

Peter stole in behind Mike. A peephole of light near a cooling duct, and some thin atmospheric light from the louvered vents on the outside wall, relieved the full darkness. Peter could make out large and small storage boxes, full of Fourth of July bunting and town Christmas decorations.

"See what you can see, and report back," Mike said. "I'll look around by the stairs for anything useful."

Channeling a leopard, Peter crept his way towards the

light through stacks of boxes. A narrow passage formed as he piled the cartons aside. Working with the greatest care and cringing with each scrape and brush, Peter finally created a small nest of boxes surrounding a tiny peephole of light. The tight passage allowed him to crawl backwards, but he could not turn around.

Peter lay on his belly, peering into the large meeting room below. He judged the hole too small, and crumbled the plaster carefully to open up the view, sending noiseless powder floating slowly to the floor below. Now, through the enlarged hole, he could see the entire gathering. A number of men were milling about, greeting one another. He recognized most of them. Peter crawled backwards until he could stand. He startled at the sight of a shadowy figure, enthroned on a large chair in the corner.

"Ho, ho, ho!" Mike laughed merrily in a low voice, having usurped Santa's throne. He was now resplendent in Santa's robe, cap and whiskers. He held a flashlight under his chin, illuminating his face with an eerie glow.

"Merry Christmas, ankle-biter!"

"Mike, stop messing around! Why don't you stand near the door, and be a look-out or something?"

"I'm not standing by the door for an hour. You do it and I'll listen in. Otherwise, there's some cool stuff in these boxes. I got this flashlight out of that bucket of tools, and I found an elf's costume that would fit you just right. Guess what else I found?"

"What?"

"Fireworks! *Boxes* full of fireworks for the town's Fourth of July celebration. I mean cannons! Not your garden variety wands and candles. There's one box of small stuff - firecrackers, smoke bombs and bottle rockets - but the other boxes are stuffed with industrial tubes for floral displays, aerial shells and rocket salutes."

"Mike, for chrissakes, don't even think about messing with that stuff! The meeting is about to start! Stay low and out of trouble."

"Trouble? Trouble from Santa?" Mike said in a deep voice. "Be careful how you speak to Santa. I don't get in trouble, I make trouble! Trouble for goobers like you that end up on my naughty list. Mess with Santa and you'll find a piece of fiery coal in your stocking at Christmas, ho, ho, ho!"

Ignoring Mike, Peter threaded his way back to his nest, making minor improvements in the passage. He laid down on his belly, surveying the men packing the room. Police Chief DeSorcier, Mike's father, wore a blue sport coat. Coach Lundsford was there in a yellow tie, blue shirt and a brown sport coat. Commissioner Clancy Scott's red hair moved through the crowd, in a limping tour of greetings with the other town leaders. Six strangers in black suits and fedora hats huddled in a great haze of cigarette smoke, clattering like insects. Towering above the dark gang was Blackthorne, puffing through the hole in his throat.

Shortly, Ted Whitson and a procession of four teens in dress khakis, led by Deck Gaines, entered the room and marched to its center. Deck, a nineteen year old high school drop-out, was a known tough who delighted in bullying anyone younger and smaller than himself. At his side was Conrad Bolger, the soda jerk. The squad of teens turned about face with a snap, coming to attention with a quick two beat stamp of their hard-soled shoes.

Police Chief DeSorcier strode in front of the color guard to the lectern, clearing his throat to address the gathered men.

"I want to thank Mr. Ted Whitson, as deacon of our Blackthorne Homeland Youth Movement, for his many long hours of selfless work in helping to organize the youth group."

Mr. Whitson stepped forward to take the microphone, but Chief DeSorcier waved the pest off with a flick of his hand, forcing Whitson's sheepish retreat to a spot behind the color guard.

"We have so much to be thankful for in America. The war in Korea is over, and our nation is prosperous, but we're also looking ahead to a demanding future. As Chief of Police, I've worked closely with Mr. Blackthorne and Blackthorne-Triangle Capital Trust, to create the Blackthorne Youth. We're planning a fantastic partnership between our organizations that will expand the Bantam League's influence across this nation."

Chief DeSorcier paused for a brief round of applause.

"The Blackthorne Youth Corps will give pride and purpose to our youth, starting with a campaign to rid our homeland of the destructive influence of comic books.

National authorities and experts have identified comics and sordid paperbacks as a major cause of teenage problems and juvenile delinquency. We'll be burning those types of trash every Wednesday night at Brandon Park this summer, and I hope everyone here will welcome the Blackthorne Youth into your homes, and encourage your neighbors to fill their collection boxes!"

Peter's heart skipped a beat. A brush of sickness, identical to the one that came over him at the ball field, now returned, ushering in a foreboding intuition, that Blackthorne sensed his presence. In that instant, Udjuk rolled over in agreement. The movement alarmed Peter, but then he reassured himself that Udjuk had only shifted against the pressure of the floor.

Peter lay still, breathing hard, studying the group surrounding Blackthorne. At Blackthorne's direction, one of his dark aides left the group and quickly exited the room. A spontaneous hunch that Mike and he should guard the attic door flashed through Peter's mind. Suddenly Udjuk turned over, leaving Peter without any doubts that he had purposefully moved. Backing quickly out of his nest, Peter hurriedly returned to the stairs. His adjusted eyes found Mike rummaging through boxes in the dim light.

"Mike! Mike! Get to the door! One of Blackthorne's men

just left the meeting, and he's checking the rooms, trying to find us."

"What makes you think so? No one knows we're here."

"Just do it! Make sure to lock the door, and keep it locked if anyone tries to push it open."

Mike flew down the eight steps and put his ear to the door. Peter joined his side and leaned in to listen. A minute passed before Mike looked over at Peter with wide eyes, pressing his thumb hard against the inside button. Presently, the shadows of a pair of shoes appeared in the bar of light under the door. A hand lightly tested the knob, but stopped. Another endless moment of held breath passed. Mike continued to press hard against the button, with a determined but strained expression. The shoes moved away, and then the fire exit opened for a moment, before closing. The replaced fire bar scraped against its metal slots. Mike held the lock another minute before relaxing.

"The security guard doesn't check the doors until everyone is out of the building," Mike whispered. "Someone tried to pick open the lock with a piece of metal in the slot, and they might have succeeded if I hadn't kept pressure on the button. I'm pretty sure a regular guy wouldn't try the lock. What made you think someone was coming to look for us?"

"I just knew it. I don't know how."

"Well, if anyone else comes around I've got a surprise for 'em. Grab me some of those tension rods sticking up out of

that can by Santa's throne."

Peter felt around in the dark until the curtain rods rattled against each other, and he selected two. Mike took one of the rods and held its rubber-tipped end hard against the button, while pulling the other end tight against the opposite wall. He tested the rod's tension with satisfaction.

"That should keep them busy if they try again. Get back and spy on the meeting, something's up! This is like top-secret if they're this tight on security."

Peter made his way to the sweltering and stagnant nest, lying flat on the floor. Cocking his head slightly left, he could see and hear to his right. Sweat beads popped up on his scalp and joined other beads to become hot streams running steadily from his crew-cut into his burning eyes. The droplets from his flushed cheeks beaded in the floor's dust. A heated argument was underway, with a group of angry men pressing in on Commissioner Scott.

"Bantam League Baseball is too big for Williamsport, Clancy," Mr. Timmons, a Board member, argued. "These men are here to help us fulfill our mission with the youth, not ruin it. All they want is to keep careful records of everyone. Knowing who's who is critical in this modern age, when so much evil is out there."

"They've given a lot of money to the league, Clancy," Coach Lundsford added, "a million dollar endowment, and that money can do a lot of good. Look at the bigger picture here, look what's in it for you: a paid office staff, travel

around the world *and* a hefty salary."

Commissioner Scott brushed through the men, advancing to the podium and taking a stand at the lectern.

"I want everybody to hear me loud and clear," Commissioner Scott pronounced into the resounding microphone. The babel died down. "First, I believe I do see the bigger picture. I haven't lost sight of it, as so many others in this room have, and *second*, this really isn't a tough decision for me. I'm fighting for people's freedom to be individuals, and that's what's important. You all seem to think a bigger league is a better league, and that nothing bad can happen with these changes, but bad things, evil things, can and do happen. I believe they already have. A lot of ugliness and secrecy have crept into this league and town, and I'll have no part of it, thank you."

Commissioner Scott flashed out of the room, in quick strides, his limp hardly noticeable. The gathered men looked at each other sullenly in quiet disbelief. Blackthorne stood from his seat at the meeting table, and thrust a shiny speech device under his jaw. The metallic voice issuing from the device commanded the room, without the need of a microphone.

"Gentleman, for those of you whom I have not met personally, my name is Dirkson Blackthorne. A year ago, Blackthorne-Triangle Capital Trust offered to help your league grow. Mr. Scott invited us, and our money, into Williamsport. I believe ugliness does exist in this

organization - Mr. Scott's own ugly accusations. Someday the half-million young men who play Bantam League Baseball will almost certainly hold the power of this country in their hands. I will not fail them, and I will not fail you."

Blackthorne's dark entourage began to clap in hollow collaboration, and soon the local men joined in. Blackthorne nodded his head in appreciation, before stretching out his palm to pat the air in a gesture for silence. The clapping abruptly stopped on the same beat, and he continued his speech.

"Mr. Scott has proven himself an opponent of growth in the league he founded. I promise you that before this summer is over, his hand will sign the papers delivering the league to our control. We will meet our deadline of August 18!"

The assembly buzzed with excitement. Blackthorne lowered his device, to draw deeply on the cigarette he placed in his throat-hole. The board members rushed to his side, asking questions and mingling in relaxed conversation. The meeting was over. The men in black suits gathered at the door, shaking hands with the townsmen as they left in groups, until all were gone, except for Chief DeSorcier.

"Chief DeSorcier, as always, a pleasure," Blackthorne's metallic voice crackled. "I wonder if we might prevail upon you to allow us to finish some private business in your fine meeting room."

"Of course, just lock up when you leave," Chief

DeSorcier said, handing Blackthorne the keys to the building. "Mr. Blackthorne, I want you to know we're all behind you on this. Even if Clancy Scott is a long-time friend, I can say truthfully he's being unreasonable and stubborn about these changes."

"Thank you for your support, sir," Blackthorne patted Chief DeSorcier's shoulder as he left the room.

When Chief DeSorcier was gone, a horrible, wet, racking cough escaped Blackthorne. He spat up a greasy black gob of tar into a rag. Savagely striding through the room, Blackthorne wiped his throat hole with the same rag.

"These pathetic humans! I will hollow this creature Scott out!" Blackthorne bellowed, pulling up his black sleeve, displaying an arm covered in tight bandages. His cold eyes stared at his arm with disgust. "This body decays further each day! How can these horrible rotting bodies contain my greatness? Have you obtained the DNA sample from the Miller subject, Bob? Is his body suitable? When The Summation arrives I will have need of a new, healthy meatsack, one without flaw."

Peter swallowed, wondering if he was 'the Miller subject' under discussion.

"Our testing was unclear. His tissue on the cleat spikes was contaminated," Bob answered. "But Whitson gathered pure blood and tissue samples from the Munro girl. She has the Nephilim eye marking. Should we prepare her?"

"Of course! Prepare them all, prepare every last one we

get our hands on."

Blackthorne's furious pacing stopped just below Peter's nest. He stabbed his cane to the floor, looked down at its tip, looked up, and then down again. Peter immediately realized that the flakes and crumbs of plaster he'd clawed loose had drifted to the floor. Blackthorne hurried away and spoke quietly to the one named Bob, handing him the building keys. Alarm entered Peter and Udjuk squirmed like an eel, sending Peter scrambling backward from his nest. Santa Mike was poking among the boxes of fireworks, with the aid of his flashlight, and he turned the beam on Peter.

"What gives? Is the meeting over? Did they name the All-Stars? Is the league staying in Williamsport?"

"Yes, it's over and we've gotta get out of here fast! They're coming for us!"

"That's crazy. Who's coming? No one knows we're here, unless you made some noise."

"I'm telling you they're coming," Peter said wildly. "They know we're in the building, and they've left the meeting room to look for us. Your dad handed them the keys to the building. They're sure to try the door again."

"Hell's bells, let me listen," Mike said, pressing his ear to the door for a long moment, before retreating up the steps. "You're right. I hear voices in the hallway. We're trapped like rats."

"If we're not home by ten my dad'll call your dad, and then they'll both be out looking for us. They won't find us

anywhere, except dead."

"Let me think for a second. There's always a way. All we need is a good plan."

Mike sat on Santa's throne, formulating their escape plan, as an insistent scratch of keys played at the lock below. This time, two pairs of foot shadows stood in the bar of light, and a determined shove tried the door.

"Mike, they're coming and pushing at the door. That curtain rod won't hold forever. Maybe we can hide in the boxes."

"That's a great plan," Mike scoffed. "There's only one way out and it's through that door. I have a new plan, but you've got to go along with everything I say, okay?"

"Okay, what's the plan?"

"First, put on this elf outfit."

"That's our plan?" Peter cried in disbelief. "For me to dress up like an elf?"

"Yeah, but it's only part of the plan. When we run we don't want anyone to recognize us, so put on these green leggings and the elf beard."

Peter listened to the rest of Mike's plan as he fastened on his hat and beard. The thumps at the door became more insistent.

"We want to draw as many as possible back into the meeting room, before we make our break. We need a diversion, and that's where the fireworks come in."

"Fireworks?"

"Yeah, fireworks are a big part of the plan. I'll start preparing while you get that elf jacket on."

"And just how are we gonna get out of the building?"

"The fire escape door."

Mike scavenged several long strands of Black Cat firecrackers from a small box. He commandeered a dozen smoke bombs, twisting their fuses together until he had three humongous bombs. Out of the bigger box of fireworks he pulled two large canisters, set on twelve-inch square wooden bases. He also pulled out a large cone fountain that came up to Peter's waist.

"The cone fountain is yours. We'll light the fuse right before we run out the door. I'll go first with one of the aerial cannons," Mike said, and then he pointed the flashlight at two brooms in the tall janitor's can. "You follow me out, with the fountain and one of those brooms, and I'll use the other. We'll brandish the brooms to back off anyone who comes at us. The brooms will be on fire, of course."

Mike pulled a long ribbon of blue bunting from the July Fourth decoration box and set it aside. Peter was now completely in costume and spoke through his beard.

"Mike, we can't carry all this crap out of here. We don't need two cannons!"

"The second cannon is for the meeting room. The show is just about to start, so get ready to move. Take these matches and get those brooms burning real good while I'm gone."

Mike slung two of the three long packets of firecrackers over his shoulder, like twin bandoleers. Smoke bombs in his right hand, a lit punk in his left, he tucked the second aerial cannon in the cradle of his left elbow. He was less cautious now as he headed for the nest with his armaments. He pushed boxes aside without concern for noise, as he widened the path to the duct-work. Peering through the peephole into the meeting room, he observed Blackthorne smoking, with his back turned.

Mike sat against a pile of boxes, shoving the duct work loose with his feet until it broke off, leaving a gaping hole in the wall. Below, Blackthorne croaked in protest as the air duct crashed to the floor.

Working with determined speed, Mike lit the smoke bombs and dropped them at Blackthorne's feet. He ignited the two long strands of firecrackers and dropped them down as well. Lastly, he stuffed the aerial cannon into the huge hole and lit the fuse, before scrambling out of the nest, through a path of scattered boxes. Behind him, the merciless booms and rapid punctuation of bursting Black Cat firecrackers lit up the meeting room. Ahead, Peter stood holding two burning brooms.

"Is burning the building down part of the plan?" Peter asked.

"No time to worry about that now, we've got to tie this aerial cannon to my chest."

Mike pulled the ribbon of blue bunting tight around the

canister, and then held the canister on his lower chest and stomach.

"Tie in back, please."

Peter propped the two burning brooms against the large waste can, and tied the canister to Mike.

"I'm Super Santa now! Are you ready, Elf Man? Give me one of our fiery brooms."

Peter reached for the brooms, but watched in horror as one of them slid off the waste can and hit a large open box of stored fireworks, scattering sparks inside. Peter and Mike looked at each other with wide eyes. They rushed to the box and looked down in it.

"Too many sparks!" Mike cried out. "This isn't part of the plan. The building will burn down, and us with it, if these fireworks go off in here."

Peter took charge, standing the flaming brooms aside against a brick wall, in as near to a safe spot as he could find.

"Hand me the claw hammer in the bucket of tools behind you," Peter ordered.

Mike handed Peter the hammer. Peter shoved his way to the wooden louvered vent, hurriedly breaking out the slats and clawing at the frame with manic energy, knocking as much wood out as humanly possible, in fifteen seconds. The attic was now fully bright, and sparks and flames were dripping from both brooms. They heard the clear hiss and crackle of a lit fuse from the box.

"Out of time," Mike announced. "She's about to blow."

The teens picked up the large box and attempted to shove it, open end first, through the shattered louver frame. The box wedged halfway through and further effort only tightened the frame's hold. A large aerial rocket screeched into the night sky.

"Ready or not, time to go," Mike yelled. "I'll charge 'em and back 'em up. You follow and set the Vesuvius Fountain behind me. Jam the fire escape door after we leave."

Leading the way down the attic stairs, Mike lit the fuse on Peter's fountain, and then the one on his cannon. Igniting the firecracker strands with the end of his broom, he swept them under the door. The hall outside the door filled with shrieks of surprise and shouts of anger. Santa collapsed the curtain rod with a swat of his broom, turned the knob, and rushed out with his firebrand swatting the air in front of him.

Santa's swift broom pounded Blackthorne's henchmen, forcing them to fall back into a pile. He continued clobbering the frantic pile with fiery swats, as his elf slipped behind him, setting out a tall cone spewing volcanic sparks. Its spitting rage increased in height and dimension with the passage of each terrible moment. The dark men cowered, holding out their hands and arms defensively to avoid the onslaught of Santa's fury. He beat them with a violence that belied his jovial nature. The men dared not lift their heads, for fear of the flame balls belching and zooming from the cannon on Santa's chest. They were blind and beaten.

Santa's elf ran to the fire escape, raised the restraining bar, and pushed the door open to freedom.

"Santa, haul ass!" his elf yelled. "The door's open!"

Santa hurled his broom at the beaten attackers, and raced through the cone of sparks in the hallway. His mocking laughter rang down the long hallway, as Elf Man wedged the red door closed with the locking bar, laughing uncontrollably at the echoing bursts of orphan firecrackers exploding behind him, like the last reluctant kernels in a roasting pot of popcorn.

7

*T*RUTH OR
*C*ONSEQUENCES

IMPROBABLY FREE ON THE FIRE escape's narrow platform, Peter and Mike froze at the sight of the smashed vent spewing fire and rockets. Peter broke Mike's spell, disentangling the canister on his chest, and tossing it over the side of the railing, where it bounced off the pavement below with an hollow echo. The pair raced down the fire ladder, glancing over their shoulders at every step.

At the bottom of the stairs, gazing at the display for an awestruck moment, they broke into a raucous fit of uncontrollable laughter. Fireworks of every description shot out from the burning box, dropping flaming bits into the alley below. Explosive bursts and insane screeches filled the air while concussive reports deadened their ears. Showers of white sparks cascaded overhead and shrieking bursts lit the night sky. The thunderous noise and nuclear light invited

every pedestrian and driver in the vicinity to stop and watch the unfolding spectacle.

"We better cheese it!" Peter shouted. "A mushroom cloud's going to appear any second."

A group of three people, two well-dressed men and an elegant woman, applauded Santa and his elf. Santa turned to take a bow, but his elf roughly pulled him over a low wall into the trees. Ducking and swatting their way through the concealing safety of the low branches, the fugitives tore off their costumes as they ran, depositing tufts of white beard in the undergrowth.

"It looks like a pack of wolves ate Santa and his elf," Mike yelled.

The teens exited the woods above the Honey Bee grocery store parking lot, as sirens circled in the night air.

"My dad will be on the scene any minute. We've got to get to the Atomic Shake, and quick. Keep out of the lights. Stay cool. No running."

The teens walked behind the Honey Bee, taking a shortcut through an open backyard to Fourth Street. A few neighborhood residents, out on their front stoops, watched the distant excitement as the sirens wound down. An older couple eyed the boys.

"What's all the excitement about?" Mike asked.

"We're not sure," the man answered. "It looks like some sort of early fireworks display."

"Wow, I wish we could have seen that. Nothing exciting

ever happens to us, right, Ricky?"

Peter looked at Mike.

"What?"

"These nice people were telling us all about the excitement, *Ricky*," Mike said, lightly pinching Peter's arm.

"Thanks, and have a good evening."

Mike scolded Peter at the corner.

"I called you Ricky in case they file a report. Never use your real name if you can help it. Man, I don't know how you stay out of trouble."

"I try not to get into any."

"Yeah, but that doesn't always work out. Sometimes trouble finds you, just like tonight's meeting."

"But it was your plan to go there! If we hadn't been there in the first place, there wouldn't have been any trouble! I don't know who or what they are, but they're not like us," Peter said. "That Blackthorne guy was yelling about his body falling apart, and all of them needing new bodies."

"You've gone whacko. I should have been the one listening in. What else do you think you heard?"

"They want control of the Bantam League, and Commissioner Scott said 'no way', so now they're trying to get rid of him. Even your father wants Mr. Scott out."

"My father wouldn't help criminals, Chum. He catches them."

"Sorry, buddy. Your dad's helping Blackthorne with these youth squads, and he's organizing a campaign to burn

comics. Deck Gaines was front and center, so there you have it, something stinks. Jeremy, Poppie and Conrad were all in the color guard with Deck. Mr. Whitson is getting samples of Jo's blood. They might even be after me. Have you ever heard of something called DNA?"

"It's something that some guys discovered a few years ago. Supposedly it's how life duplicates itself. Why?"

"Blackthorne said something about needing a body for himself," Peter answered. "He wanted mine or Jo's. It didn't seem to matter to him. He wanted our DNA."

"You've flipped your lid," Mike sneered. "How is anyone going to take you seriously enough to investigate these guys? We better put what happened on ice, or we'll get tagged for the fireworks, and any other trouble from tonight."

They arrived at the highway running in front of the Atomic Shake. The yellow light from the order window spread into the darkness. Red, green and blue neon tubes lit the burger joint's metal canopy, buzzing and crackling, as moths careened in erratic orbits above tables overflowing with teenagers. Peter smelled the char-grilled burgers and fries, and in spite of their recent trouble, the thought of a burger made his mouth water.

They waited for a break in traffic before dashing across the highway to the parking lot. When a group of friends from school called them over, Peter glanced at Mike and saw a problem.

"Yikes! I got something really bad to tell you, Mike, but you can't react at all. Stay cool, okay?"

"Sure, I won't move."

"You have to stay cool."

"I'm cool as a cucumber."

"All right, you have a big spot of singed hair at the back of your head."

"What?!" Mike let out an agonized groan as he felt through the short, frazzled nubs of his hair. "What the heck! How am I going to hide this?"

"Don't worry, I have an idea. I'll blow a huge bubble, and pop it on the back of your head. You'll have a bunch of gum in your hair, and no one will see the burnt patch."

"What a genius idea. We'll never get the gum out without cutting my hair."

"That's the worst part, you're gonna have to cut your hair short like mine."

"A crew cut?"

"It's gotta be shorter than the shortest burnt hair, and that's pretty short. If you have a better idea, let me in on it."

Mike puzzled for a moment as Peter chewed his bubble gum, working it towards bubble-blowing consistency.

"Well, we've got to make an appearance here, to flesh out our cover story. How about this - go buy a shake, and we'll pretend we're goofing around. Dump the shake on the back of my head to make it good and messy, and we'll use that as an excuse to cut out early."

"Not bad, it might work, but I'll keep working the bubble gum angle, for a backup plan, while I get the shake."

Peter went to the stand while Mike stood awkwardly alone in the half-darkness. Tom Majors, a classmate, got up from the students' table, and walked over to Mike.

"Where've you guys been?" Tom asked. "It's after nine, and we're about to leave."

"We forgot about the social. We were watching *Dragnet* when we remembered, so we came over, for the last part anyway."

"Did you guys see the fireworks?"

"Yeah, we did. What was that about?"

"We thought maybe you knew, since you were coming from that direction."

"We saw some fireworks, over the rooftops, and then heard some sirens. A lot of excitement about something.

We'll try to find out more when we go back."

"It was a fun show to watch," Tom said.

Peter came up behind Mike, holding his fingers to his lips, signaling Tom to keep quiet. He lifted the milkshake and dumped it over Mike's head.

"You freak! What are you doing?" Mike cried out, in mock surprise. "I'll wring your neck."

Peter ran towards the highway, Mike giving chase.

"See you guys later, I guess," Tom called out.

The pair continued running until they were out of sight of the grill, and then they dropped gear to a fast walk.

"What a mess, but it got us out of there," Mike said.

"A loss of a good shake," Peter mourned.

"Let's go back on Court Street so we can cruise by the town hall, and see what's what."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"We'll go by at a distance. If there's lots of people there we'll just blend in with the crowd. It might help us to know what other people know or saw."

Mike picked a sheet of newspaper out of a trash can, wiping some of the shake off his neck and out of his hair before running his pocket comb through it.

"What does it look like?"

"Like you put on way too much Brylcreem, but it hides the singed spot."

"Good enough for now, but how do I get a haircut? The barber will see the burnt hair."

"I'll cut it at home tonight."

"You cutting *my* hair? Whose hair've you ever cut in your life?"

"Oso's."

"Oso's hair. Probably his matted ears. Fantastic."

"If it doesn't work, at least I'll cut out the burned hair, and then you can get a real haircut. You might not need a crew cut, maybe a flat top will do."

The teens turned a corner, into a shower of spinning red lights washing across the faces of a large crowd. Children jumped across the massive hoses and dying streams of water

rushing into the sewers. A large spotlight canvassed the sides of the building, for evidence of further flames, and a few firemen stood on the fire escape. Townspeople gossiped and studied various and particular aspects of the scene. Some pointed towards the building, others towards the gigantic lights and still others shyly examined the gleaming hardware on the fire engines.

"Come on, let's get closer and listen," Mike said.

Peter pushed his hands into his pockets, dropping his head, as Mike sliced through the crowd to get to his father. Chief DeSorcier stood at his police cruiser.

"Hey, dad, what's going on?"

"Mike, what are you two doing here? What's in your hair?"

"Some kid at the Atomic Shake tripped and dumped his shake on my head, but I already wiped most of it off. Mr. Miller let us go to an end-of-school party there at the grill, but the party's over. What happened here?"

"I'm still trying to figure it out myself. A group of us had a meeting tonight, and right after it ended a fire broke out. It seems like it started with the town's stored fireworks, but I'm assuming the fire involved thieves. Luckily, some of Mr. Blackthorne's men were still in the building and surprised them. The thieves got out the back way through the fire escape. The jokers were wearing Santa costumes, but we'll catch 'em and show 'em a Merry Christmas, in jail."

"Real crime right here in Williamsport," Mike whistled.

"They must've been totally hardened criminals from New York or Philadelphia."

"Maybe. I hope it's not anyone local. I'm going to run some checks, and see if there've been any other municipal break-ins recently. Maybe we'll find a pattern, but it's hard to know what they wanted, because their scheme was broken up early."

Peter and Mike excused themselves when Mr. Sellers, the Fire Chief, moseyed over to compare notes with Chief DeSorcier. The teens moved a good distance away, to watch the drama and activity surrounding the lit building. Peter startled when a metallic voice interrupted their observations.

"A marvelous bit of destruction, I must say," Mr. Blackthorne growled through his device. His wrinkled skin was as dry as the dunes at Giza, his eyes as empty and matte black as a shark's. "This scene brings back memories of the firestorms in Germany, after the night bombings during the recent war, on a scale less grand, of course. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Dirkson Blackthorne, and your names are?"

"Why d'ya need to know, Big Daddy? Are you writing a book?" Mike answered sarcastically. "We don't speak to weirdo strangers. Our names are our business."

"Your names are my business because I make them my business," Blackthorne spat venomously, lowering his speaking device, as he brought the red jewel capstone of his

staff to his throat. "You should mind your manners and *speak* when I ask your names."

Peter felt a cold race of fear run from the base of his chilled brain to his toes. Fear puddled around his feet, freezing him to the spot. He felt compelled to speak at the command of Blackthorne's words. He was about to spill everything when he felt the calm reassurance of a familiar voice and a steady hand on his shoulder.

"Hello, Chumbucket, Mike," Commissioner Scott said easily. His battle-mangled nose lent a hard edge to his otherwise pleasant features. "Did you have business with these two young men, Blackthorne? I thought we concluded business for the night."

"Our business will never be concluded, Scott, not until you sign the papers. If you continue to refuse the fruitful terms we offer, you'll find our last offer most unkind."

"Nuts to your offers, Blackthorne. Bantam League Baseball will leave Williamsport only over my dead body."

"Whatever terms you desire, sir. I will see *you* two another time. Good evening."

Blackthorne rejoined his circle of attendants, and the clouds of smoke and clicks and clacks of their conversation resumed. Even in his tailored suit, Blackthorne was corrupt and wasted. Peter hated the hideous electronic kazoo he used to speak.

"That's a nice cane he has there," Mike observed. "I'd like to have it."

"You steer clear of him, Mike, and any of the other men around him," Mr. Scott warned. "We had a meeting here tonight with them. After saying my piece, I came outside to have a smoke and cool off. Before I know it, all Hades breaks loose behind the building. I found fireworks blazing, and two fellas scooting off, like wolves were at their tails. Did you two see or hear anything?"

"No, sir. We were just passing by," Mike said.

"One of the fellas I saw had a bandaged hand, just like yours, Chum."

"Geez, Louise!" Peter cried out involuntarily. "I need some water. Do you think I can drink from one of the fire hoses?"

Mike reached out and clamped on Peter's arm, to steady his nerves.

"I hear rumors some organized crime outfit is responsible for the fire," Commissioner Scott continued. "Maybe they're the Black Hats in this caper, but I don't think so. I think it's just a local firebug, or *two*. I haven't been able to get in and assess the damage, of course, but it might be upwards of a thousand dollars in damages. There's also the matter of how to pay for the town fireworks display, and that could be another two or three hundred dollars."

Mr. Scott paused to let the numbers sink in.

"Someone's got to pay for the town's loss. I wonder if those firebugs have that kind of money."

The teens remained silent, and Peter wondered if this

longest night of his life would ever end. Mr. Scott finished his cigarette as he looked up at the building. After a moment, he threw the cigarette butt down on the pavement, crushing it under foot.

"I doubt it. Firebugs don't usually save much money in their piggy banks. They burn through it too quickly, I suppose," Commissioner Scott smiled. "Say, did you fellas know that we get ten thousand visitors in town, during the five days of the World Series? They spend about fifty dollars each while they're here. Do the math and that's a half-million dollars. Maybe you and some of your friends could be the good guys, throw on your White Hats and raise the money - put on a show for all the visitors - sell tickets, bake pies, wash cars. You guys pretty much have the summer off, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll bet we could rake in a thousand dollars. All I need are some volunteers, someone willing to take on the job."

"We'll volunteer, sir," Mike said, "and glad to do it, too."

"Great to hear. You two mull it over, come up with some ideas. We'll meet in my office, if it's not burned down, next week to start the planning. I'm excited, are you?"

"Yes, sir, we're excited."

"Yes, sir," Peter agreed.

Mr. Scott walked off through the puddles of water, leaving Mike and Peter to stare at each other.

"We'll talk about this stuff in my room, with the door

closed," Peter said.

"Mr. Scott is going pretty easy on us, by giving us a chance to make it good."

"I know, but I'm worn out. My nerves are shot. I just want to sit in front of the TV, and wake up tomorrow like nothing happened."

The teens started for home, and their arrival at nine- forty pleased Mr. Miller.

"Thanks for coming home on time. It lets me know I can trust you."

"Yes, sir. Mike and I want to watch TV and have a snack."

"Didn't you just have malts? You fellows sure have big appetites! You eat all the time."

"Yes, sir, but we're still hungry."

"I think there's still some pie in the fridge from yesterday, and you can watch whatever you want. I'll go read in the den, but remember it's still a school night, so no staying up past eleven."

The friends raided the refrigerator, pulling out leftover pie and a bottle of milk. Food trays in their laps, they stared into the TV, watching a late night horror movie showcase called '*Lights Out*'. The featured movie was '*Them*', a story about nuclear testing in the desert that created giant ants. They watched in suspense as a father and daughter scientific team discovered the truth about the giant ants, learning their team had to destroy the ants before the queen could breed

and nest again. Mr. Miller came into the living room before the movie was finished.

"It's past time for bed, fellas. Eleven was tops."

"But it's practically over. How about if we go to bed when 'Lights Out' is done?"

"Okay, okay. Lights Out," Mr. Miller dead-panned, as he flipped the switch and turned off the television.

Peter and Mike put their trays away and trudged upstairs.

"Your dad got us pretty good on that one. How do you think the ants got so gigantic?"

"Radiation. What else could have done it?"

Peter opened his bedroom door and immediately crawled to the top bunk. Mike plopped down on the lower one, stretching out with his hands behind his head, suddenly realizing he had forgotten about the dried sludge in his hair.

"Yuck, I've got to get this stuff out of my hair."

"Only way is to cut it out. Give me a minute and I'll get the scissors."

Mike rose from his bunk and dug through Peter's collection of comic books, leafing through the pages of *Jungle Action #2*. One comic panel showed a virginal maiden in scant clothing tied to a primitive wood construction. Natives readied her sacrifice while a male explorer crouched in some nearby ferns.

"I think I have an idea for the big show," Mike said.

"What big show?"

"The show to pay for repairs to the town hall. We need

to start coming up with ideas. I could do a huge stage magic trick, something about a girl being sacrificed to fire. It looks like she gets burned up, but we put out the flames and she reappears."

"Fire!?" Peter said in astonishment. "Don't you ever tire of messing with fire? Geez!"

"It's not messing. Fire doesn't hurt anything, losing control of it does. This will be a magic trick, an illusion, and our stage helper wouldn't really be in any danger. I need to research similar tricks, because I don't know of any exactly like it. I'll probably have to invent it myself. Maybe Jo will volunteer as my assistant."

"Why can't you just do the tricks you already know?"

"Because it would be a big crowd, and a big stage. On the big stage, you need to do big tricks, not parlor magic."

Peter climbed down from his bunk, and searched through his desk drawer. He pulled out some scissors, snipping the blades together quickly several times for effect.

"The barbershop is open. We'll say you fell asleep with some chewing gum in your mouth, and you rolled your hair around in it while you slept. We couldn't think of any other way, so we cut it out, and tomorrow we'll go to a real barber."

"Okay, do your worst."

Mike sat in the chair, and Peter laid a pillowcase inside Mike's collar, to cover his shoulders.

"I've seen them do that at the barbershop. Stay still."

Peter quickly clipped at the silver dollar sized frizz spot. He thinned the rest of the hair out from that point, cutting some from the top and sides. He attempted some sort of symmetry, but had little success. When Peter was finished, Mike's cropped and chopped hair resembled Peter's specialty, a matted dog's ear. He took the pillowcase from around Mike's neck and shook it off in the wastebasket.

"It looks okay, not great."

"Do you have a mirror?"

"You don't want to look at it in a mirror. You need a good night's sleep."

Peter climbed to the top bunk and undressed, tossing his clothes down to the floor.

"Turn off the lights, will you?" Peter mumbled. "Good night, see you in the morning."

"Lights out."

Mike flipped the switch and fell exhausted into the bottom bunk. His active and creative mind raced on making plans, and variations on the plans, for the big show. He imagined Jo in a white outfit, with a stage made to look like a jungle, and a large totem serving as her funeral pyre. Tiki torches and Polynesian tribesmen completed the picture, as Morpheus carried him away, his imagination merging with his dreams.

8

MIKE'S HAIRCUT

THE NEXT MORNING MIKE AWOKE to Oso's warm tongue licking the previous night's malt off his hair and neck. Stroking Oso's back while he cleared his head, Mike recalled that the first order of business was to wash his hair. Rising from bed to dress, Mike stepped on Peter's discarded jeans, and felt a sharp pain on the ball of his foot. Picking up the jeans and finding nothing beneath them, he shook them out, an action that flung a loose stone to the floor.

Mike picked it up for examination, and discovered a highly detailed rendering of a seal. He turned it over with his fingers, remembering a discussion about a stone seal that moved when asked questions. He wondered if this was the supposed magic seal. Peter hadn't mentioned having it in his possession, and it bothered Mike that he would withhold such important information. He'd wanted to study it as much as Peter, and he wondered why Peter was being so secretive and selfish about it. He decided to keep the stone until Peter mentioned it to him. Mike wanted him to sweat a little and

admit to holding out, before giving it back. He punched Peter's shoulder to wake him.

"Chum, wake up and get dressed and help me wash my hair before school. I can do it in the backyard, but I need you to hold the hose."

Peter roused himself with difficulty. Looking at Mike through exhausted eyes, he eventually understood that he was to get dressed, go downstairs and hold a hose over Mike's head. He dropped from his bunk and slid into his jeans. He patted his pockets, and a look of concern spread over his face. He turned in all directions, looking around the floor, kneeling on the oval braided rug and sweeping beneath the bottom bunk with his hand. Rising slowly, he continued to scan the floor carefully.

"Something wrong? Did you lose something?"

"Yeah," Peter said slowly. "I had something in my pocket when we came upstairs."

"What was it?"

"My pocket knife."

"I'm sure it'll turn up, let's go wash my hair. Bring a towel and some soap."

Peter lifted the pillowcase, the one used for a shoulder drape the night before, from the back of his desk chair.

"This'll do for a towel, and I'll get a bar of soap from the bathroom."

The teens marched downstairs, and found the coffee pot percolating on the stove, evidence someone was awake in

the house. In the backyard, Peter held the hose for Mike.

"Duck down, and I'll soak your head."

Mike lowered his head under the hose, and Peter doused his hair with cold water. When Mike's hair was thoroughly wet, Peter swung the hose to the side, where Oso patiently waited his turn for a long splashy drink. Mike scrubbed his hair with the bar of soap.

"Okay, rinse."

Peter waved the hose back and forth over Mike's scalp while Mike massaged his hair.

"Turn your head side-to-side," Peter ordered.

Mike rotated his head, and ran his fingers in a lifting motion through the shortened hair. They both agreed it was clean and rinsed, before Peter handed Mike the pillowcase to dry his hair. After drying, Mike's hair was pointing up, at all directions and angles, in many different lengths.

"You look like Freddy the Freeloader," Peter laughed. "You could be a hobo."

"Funny guy. There's another idea for the show, a hobo comedy skit."

Mike took out his pocket comb, and smoothed his hair back as best he could.

"You've ruined my pompadour. I don't know how I'll make it through school today."

The teens came into the kitchen through the back door, as Mrs. Miller was starting breakfast.

"What are you two doing up so early? What were you

doing with the hose?"

"Washing Mike's hair. Some bubble gum fell out of his mouth while he was sleeping, and it got stuck in his hair. We couldn't get it out so I cut it out with scissors."

"You can freeze gum out of hair," Mrs. Miller said, pulling Mike to her maternally, while inspecting his hair closely. "Mike has such nice hair, and now it's all chopped up."

"We didn't know what else to do, but it doesn't matter. He's been thinking about getting a flattop anyway. Right, Mike?"

"Yeah, a lot of movie stars wear flattops, and the girls at school go nuts about 'em," Mike said, as a slow smile crept across his face. "Like Jo. She thought the flattop of that guy in *Revenge of the Creature* was boss."

Peter was a little irritated with Mike's sudden acceptance of his new hairstyle.

"The barber might have to cut it shorter than that guy's hair. Your hair's chopped pretty good, and you might need a short flattop."

"We'll see, it might not be as bad as you think."

"I hope it is, I mean, I hope it isn't. I hope it isn't as bad as I think."

The teens stared at each other for a moment, and Peter looked towards the stove to break it off.

"Are you cooking oatmeal for breakfast, mom?"

"Yes, oatmeal and bacon and toast. I'll call you in when

it's ready."

Janice joined them for breakfast in the den, sitting in her dad's chair. They watched *Rin Tin Tin*, the outcast German Shepard, sprint through the dusty draws of the desert southwest to save the troops of Fort Apache.

"Oso can do the same things as Rinny," Peter remarked. "He's a good jumper. He can jump an eight foot wall if he's running."

"Where did you see him do that?"

"He jumped the McKelvey's stone wall, the one by the park."

"That's a tall wall, but I don't know if it's eight feet."

"We'll measure it sometime. I think it is."

"I don't think so."

"Why argue? I said we'll measure, neither of us knows for sure."

"You said it like you're an authority on jumping tall walls."

"Man, somebody's in a bad mood. We're headed off, mom," Peter yelled. "We're going to the barbers after school."

"Don't forget your lunches. I want you home after the barbers. I mean it. Don't get any ideas that you're going to wander around town for hours just because school is almost out."

Mike ignored the teasing of his classmates throughout the day, and Peter continued to follow his doctor's orders to

keep his hand raised. His surprised teachers called on him repeatedly, to answer questions, so he had to pay more attention in class. He answered several questions correctly. Late in the afternoon, Peter saw Karen at her locker and stopped to talk.

"With my hand up in the air all the time, I'm becoming a teacher's pet," he grinned.

"I think it suits you, it's about time you stepped up to the plate in class. You've had it pretty easy all year. Brains and brawn are quite a combination," Karen smiled. Her compliment secretly pleased Peter. Karen wasn't one to praise sloppy performance, and her words meant he'd met her high standards. After school, Peter and Mike checked in at his house before visiting the barbershop.

"We'll be back in an hour or two."

When they opened the door, Oso slipped out in front of them, running ahead, wagging his tail with excitement as he sniffed the bushes.

"I don't feel like chasing him. I guess he can come along," Peter groaned. "He can wait outside the shop, if he behaves."

The rotating barber pole outside Mr. Antonelli's shop indicated he was open for business. Mr. Antonelli motioned Mike into the chair.

"I can tell who needs the haircut today. What barber did this to you, Mike?"

"A lousy barber. I just need it evened out, maybe a

flattop."

"Not a crew cut, like your friend Peter, hey? You want the real flattop, with the sides short and longer on top, but flat?"

"Yes, a flattop, like you see in the movies these days."

"Some of the guys have asked for a 'Mac Curtis'

haircut. He's some music star. It leaves a curl in front and ducktail in the back. I might be able to do that, even though your hair, it's a mess."

"No, just a flattop, no landing strip on top. Maybe a flattop with fenders."

"Okay, a flattop with fenders. You want it blocked in the back, or tapered?"

"Blocked."

"And a shave today? I have warm towels, ready for you."

"Yes, a shave would be nice, thanks."

"Okay."

Mr. Antonelli finished the haircut and shave in short order, giving Mike a mirror to examine his work. The flattop itself was smooth and thick, like a shoe brush in texture and color, and fairly long on the sides and back. Mike handed Mr. Antonelli fifty cents, adding a dime tip.

"You come in again in three weeks, Mike. A word of advice for you in the future: don't let whoever did that to your hair near you again."

Mr. Antonelli bowed to the teens as they left the shop. Oso crawled out from his shelter of shade, under a bench,

to resume tagging along.

"Mr. Antonelli's a swell guy. I think it looks pretty good, what do you think?"

"Yeah, it looks pretty good, but you might be using Butch Wax from now on."

The teens walked down Third Street, venturing into Aunt Mable's Donut Shop for chocolate glazed donuts. Donuts in hand, they continued up Market Street towards Peter's house.

"You can make donuts at home, you know," Mike said. "You just use biscuit dough, pop a hole in the center with a bottle top, and fry them in oil. Homemade donuts are the best."

They stopped to look in the window at Woolworth's. An unpleasant voice interrupted their discussion.

"What're you dorks doing?"

Peter and Mike confronted four unfriendly faces, all from the Blackthorne Youth, all wearing their khaki uniforms. Deck Gaines led the group, but the speaker was none other than Conrad Bolger.

"We're waiting for The King of the Dorks to arrive," Mike said. "Since you're here now, we can start the meeting."

The other teens in his group laughed, and Conrad's red acne became more intense.

"You think you're hot-snot," Conrad shot back, "but you're just a pipsqueak."

"Conrad, you really should use something other than a wrecking bar to clear up your face."

This time there was no laughter, and Deck stepped forward to manage a situation Conrad was failing to control. Deck was several inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than either Mike or Peter, but they stood their ground. Oso's attentive brown eyes watched Deck.

"Mr. Blackthorne told us to look for you two, while we were on patrol. He said he hasn't forgotten about you, and he'll find you out."

"Nice haircut," a tough behind Deck said, referencing Mike. "I'll bet you think it's really cool."

"What about your doofus friend over here? Let's see his haircut."

Deck stretched out his hand, and his finger flipped Peter's baseball cap off his head. Oso was on Deck in the same instant, snarling and snapping at his feet. The hair on the back of his neck stood up like quills. Instinctively, Deck and his band of thugs backed away, Deck's voice cracking, as his eyes widened. His fists and legs drew in to brace for Oso's attack.

"Get that dog off me, or I'll kill him!"

Peter bent down and took hold of Oso's collar.

"Down, boy."

The hair on the back of Oso's neck went down. He continued monitoring Deck, and the other thugs, for any sudden or aggressive movements. There was only silence,

except for Oso's low guttural warnings. Deck unclenched his fists.

"That's a pretty good dog you have there," he admitted. "I could have taken him, but I guess I'll leave him alone. You pansies think about what I said, because we'll be looking for you every day. Come on, guys."

The boastful band sailed away, with Peter, Mike and Oso watching them to a safe distance.

"Good boy, Oso," Peter said. "Deck isn't so tough."

"Man, Oso got after them, didn't he? He went after them like a wild bear!"

"That's what his name means - Oso is 'Bear' in Spanish."

Mike bent down to pat Oso on his head, and Oso gave a lick to Mike's face in return.

"I was thinking," Mike mused. "Maybe there is someone who'd listen to us about that meeting last night. Remember that the FBI lady said we could talk to her about anything suspicious. She seemed okay."

"What's our story going to be? That we burned down the town hall, after breaking and entering, so that we could spy on the Bantam League officers? She'll tell us we're under arrest."

"We wouldn't put it that way, of course, but maybe we can point her in the right direction, enough that she can investigate on her own. I'll think of some way to put it."

"I vote we forget about it, and wait for things to go back to normal."

"Too late, Chum," Mike said, shaking his head. "The Normal World has come and gone. I'm not the sort to hide out from bullies all summer. I want to know who this Blackthorne is, and what his gang is about. I think it's time we call in the FBI."

9

THE RESCUE

THE WILLIAMSPORT BUSINESS DISTRICT was a ghost town of tall windows, all watching Mike and Peter as they approached the Grainger building, which housed the suite number Miss Hanson's card identified as her office. A black car slid past them, and parked just down the street, idling its engine. A gray man in a dark suit unfolded from the rear door, smoking a cigarette. Peter felt the man's eyes fix on him. Mike pulled at the brass handle on the office door. Locked.

"Now what?" Peter asked. "Maybe we should've called her first."

"I think we just missed her. We'll come back when her office is open, but the next time we'll be more careful about being followed."

To their surprise the locked door suddenly opened, and Miss Hanson appeared.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"At the ballgame, you said we could drop by to talk about Jim Calendar and Leslie DeBrulle," Mike answered. "But

we also just noticed those men up the street seem to have followed us here."

"You don't say," Miss Hanson looked at the car, and beckoned them inside. "I locked up at five, but I'm always working late. Have a seat. Do you know who the men are?"

"We think they work for a guy named Blackthorne. He's been threatening us."

"Dirkson Blackthorne, right?" Miss Hanson said, strolling to the window and holding the blinds open a sliver, peering out. "Smokes through his neck?"

"Right. That's him."

"It fits," Miss Hanson said, flicking the blinds closed. "Let's reintroduce ourselves. I'm Madeline Hanson. Feel free to call me Maddie."

"I'm Mike and this is Chumbucket."

"*Chumbucket* can't be your real name..." Maddie laughed.

"It's his nickname. He's the catcher on our team."

"Peter. Most people call me Chum, because my dad is also a Peter."

"All right then," Maddie smiled, showing her even white teeth. "Let's get down to business. So, what else do you have for me? Dirkson Blackthorne is already on my radar, so that gives you points in my book."

"Tell her what you heard, Chum."

"Well, I overheard the men saying they want control of our baseball league. They're starting up a youth club, and

ordering some of them to come after Mike and me. There's other stuff, too. They're trying to force our commissioner, Mr. Scott, out."

Maddie rose from her swivel chair. She went into her inner office and brought out a jeweled red necklace for them to examine.

"Have you seen Blackthorne's men giving out red stones, like this one, to anyone?"

"My brother Doug has one, smaller, set in a ring," Mike offered. "Blackthorne has a huge stone, like yours, set in a snake's head cane."

"Everyone who joins the Blackthorne Youth gets a ring," Peter added.

"Originally, all the stones were cut from a much larger gem," Maddie nodded. "They come from the same family, you might say."

Maddie pressed the jewel into Mike's palm. Mike felt a glowing warmth spread up his arm, filling his body with a tingling pleasant rush. Then he heard Maddie's voice inside his head, without a word coming from her mouth: "Mary had a little lamb..."

"What kind of magic trick is that?" he demanded, dropping the stone on her desktop.

"What happened?" Peter asked in alarm.

"Mike heard my voice inside his head," Maddie laughed. "I saw your act at the talent show, Mike. I suspected then that you might have some unique powers of discernment,

enough to read people pretty well. For instance, something tells me I can trust you two."

"You hardly know us," Mike said. "Why would you think that?"

"I don't think it," Maddie smiled. "*I know it*. Prove me wrong."

"Can you read Mike's mind through the stone?" Peter asked.

"No. I was sending my thoughts, not receiving his, but I suppose I could, with practice. These rubies can focus and transmit many sorts of energy waves - light and sound waves, for example. They're expertly cut and polished. Our labs have studied them, and they all have the same basic structure. If the stones can transmit thoughts, I imagine they can also record thoughts. But we don't know how to play back what they record."

"That's out of this world," Mike whistled, reexamining the stone.

"I keep this one in my possession at all times," Maddie said, retrieving it. "When I was given this assignment, I was also given a file on a scientist named Nicola Tesla. He died about ten years ago. Mr. Tesla invented many useful things, but his best inventions are kept secret, above top secret, because they're so advanced and powerful. Supernatural, really. I've come to believe that everything in these cases of missing teenagers is somehow strangely connected - Tesla, these stones, Blackthorne and his crew."

Mike and Peter looked at each other, unsure how many of their recent troubles they could safely unload. Mike shifted in his seat.

"I didn't think the FBI investigated supernatural things," Mike said cautiously. "They're not crimes."

"You'd be surprised how much of the supernatural or paranormal there is in *normal* crime," Maddie said. "In this particular investigation, I'd say it's about fifty-fifty."

"The men described this girl I know, Jo, as something called a Nephilim," Peter suddenly blurted out.

"Jo's the young woman who performed that dance at the talent show, isn't she?" Maddie straightened, pulling in closer to her desk and taking up a pencil and pad of paper. Her sudden intense interest unleashed a pent-up torrent of questions, statements and doubts from Peter.

"One guy said Jo had Nephilim markings in her eye. Our friend Karen tried on Doug's ring and she said she could hear people's voices, like you just did with Mike. But she's intuitive. I'm not intuitive, not even as much as Mike. To be completely honest, I don't want anything to do with any of this, and the only reason I'm involved is that I accidentally listened in on a secret meeting of Blackthorne's. He wants blood and tissue samples from all the guys in our league and Jo. They were talking about DNA," Peter felt a brief swelling of pride at remembering the scientific term. "Mr. Blackthorne was yelling about his body rotting, and him needing a new one. It seemed like all the men needed new

bodies, and they were in a hurry to get them. Later, Blackthorne demanded I tell him my name and when he spoke into the crystal on his cane, and I felt like he had control of me, but Mr. Scott interrupted him."

Maddie was taking down swift notes in shorthand, saying nothing. When Peter ran out of gas, she turned her brown eyes to Mike.

"I didn't listen in on the meeting," Mike said defensively. "But I can say they've been following us around. Blackthorne's cane is pretty cool, it's for real, like Chum said."

"My goodness, you guys are really involved in this, aren't you?" Maddie sighed. "I wish you two had come to me right away. Possibly, I could have steered you clear. Everything you've told me actually fits into the puzzle. If it's true that your friend Jo has DNA markers for Nephilim traits, they'll be especially interested in her. They'll lure her into their organization as a leader, or to Hollywood as a starlet. The movie-goers would be ga-ga over her, when they should be paying attention to the gradual loss of their basic freedoms. It would shock you to find out how many movie stars are Nephilim controlled. In Los Angeles, my partner and I uncovered the Hollywood connections, but then he turned up dead. We were getting too close to the truth. I needed the time and freedom to follow my leads, so I transferred to work this case in Williamsport."

"So you think Blackthorne and his men did something to

Jim and Leslie?" Mike asked, his brow darkening.

"I suspect their disappearances are related, yes. There's an advanced research facility near here, named Skytop. It's owned by Blackthorne's company, but it has government contracts, some with our intelligence agencies. The intelligence agencies investigate and research *everything, inside and outside this world*. Believe it or not, there are many worlds, many dimensions, separated only by small differences in frequency, like radio stations. Tune out of one, tune into another. All you have to do is turn the dial. I believe that's what the Nephilim are doing at Skytop, turning the dial. The facility serves them as an interdimensional travel gate, a portal, and something big is about to happen."

"So you're saying, for a fact, that they're not from earth?" Mike asked.

"That's what I'm saying," Maddie answered. "The problem they have is they can enter our world, but they don't have suitable bodies to physically exist here. They're basically soulless electrical beings, who need constant recharging. Maybe in their world the air is alive with electricity and they don't have any problems. Human souls are electromagnetic, and we constantly replenish our energy like a dynamo, drawing life energy from the spiritual realm, from God. Notice that I didn't include human souls as something the Nephilim can control. They can take control of our bodies, thoughts and emotions, but that's only if we

let them. Humans have to voluntarily surrender their souls, and some humans do sell their souls for fame, wealth and power. A human soul is a great prize to the Nephilim. Not having access to spiritual energies, they feed on human souls and bodies when they're here. It's a gruesome and dark business. As I said, I don't even know that I can trust my fellow agents with my findings."

"You trust us, but not your own agents?" Mike asked skeptically.

"Who else? I've come to the conclusion that the Nephilim have hundreds or even thousands of agents installed as spies and operatives in our government, including the FBI, and our research facilities. They're gaining control of our country, of humanity, by infiltration, not brute force invasion. They're sly. They lie, cheat and steal. When those tricks don't work they trap important and powerful people in embarrassing or criminal situations and use blackmail. If they can't trick you, or corrupt you, they'll kill you."

"Kill us? Dang, all we want is to be left alone," Peter said, rubbing his face in dismay and disgust.

"This is dangerous business, and starting right now I'm going to ask both of you to step back and stay away from Blackthorne, and any of his associates. Give up baseball, if you have to. Is baseball worth your life? When I have the solid evidence that Blackthorne is responsible for the disappearance of Jim and Leslie, I can try to put facts in front of someone I can trust. For now, it's all just too

unbelievable. As for you two, no more poking around. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure, no sweat, but what about the goons following us around?" Mike asked. "What can we do about them?"

"I'll head across the street right now, to spook 'em a little, kinda let 'em know that the watchers are being watched," Maddie said, opening the door for Mike and Peter, and coming out on the sidewalk with them. "You guys take care. You've been a big help."

Maddie shut the office door behind her, but didn't lock it. Evidently she expected to be right back. She waved good-bye, before crossing over to confront the men in the car.

"She wants us to give up baseball?" Mike said, shooting Peter a disbelieving glance.

"She can't mean it," Peter replied. "I think she was just kidding."

The duo watched the ominous vehicle jolt away as soon as Maddie approached it. She stood in the middle of Market Street, deliberating her next move. Evidently, she decided to pursue the scoundrels because she jumped into her own car, a red sports coupe, and performed a squealing, rubber-burning reversal in the road, hurtling up beside Mike and Peter, and tossing Mike her set of office keys.

"Lock up the office, Mike. I'll get the keys from you later," she shouted.

Mike locked up as instructed, and the pair had just turned the corner when a distant squeal of brakes brought them

back to Market Street. Two blocks away, a second black car pulled out in front of Maddie's coupe, and then a third sedan blocked her in from behind, preventing her from pulling away. Maddie abandoned her car and hastened on foot towards the Susquehanna bridge. One of the sedans followed her, while the other two waited. The unfolding scene was eerily quiet and desperate.

"Mike, this doesn't look good. Maddie might need our help."

"Chum, she's FBI. I'm sure she knows how to take care of herself."

"I don't think she was expecting this. You can go on, but I'm going back."

Mike cursed under his breath, racing after Peter, catching up with him just as the black car came to a stop on the empty bridge. The other two cars pulled in behind the first car, at the foot of the bridge. Blackthorne stepped out, his staff raised high. Maddie drew out a gun from a holster hidden beneath her jacket, but a hissing sapphire lightning bolt issued from Blackthorne's staff, striking the road behind Maddie, releasing a sudden dense thunder-crack of chilled air and blue steam, knocking her down to the asphalt.

Through a spreading blue fog, Peter saw Maddie lifting herself up and he was relieved, but soon horrified to witness a large black snake slithering towards her, seemingly materialized from the lightning. The serpent sank its fangs into Maddie's lower leg. She cried out, dragging and lifting

herself to the bridge parapet, before collapsing and falling into the cold deep Susquehanna, still clutching her gun.

Peter and Mike covered their mouths to prevent their shocked cries from escaping. The hideous black snake wound its way through the steam, and into the idling black car. The pair waited until the black cars zoomed past their hiding place, and then they bolted past rows of warehouses, towards the bridge footings on the riverbank. An oncoming car stopped on the bridge at the spot where Maddie had tumbled over. The driver shouted down at them from the bridge: "I see her, she's drifting into that pile of logs!"

The duo looked at each other.

"You're the one with the Rescue Merit Badge," Peter said.

"It's a bad time you've chosen to remind me of it, Chum, but you're going in with me," Mike demanded, before shouting to the man on the bridge. "Get to a payphone, and call the police! My dad is Chief DeSorcier. Tell him we need him here quickly, and to bring blankets and anything else he can think of, to help a drowned person."

Leaving their jeans on for decency, Mike and Peter stripped off their other clothes, before racing into the Susquehanna's chilly waters, up to their chests. Only then did they begin stretching out, swimming towards the dark heap caught in the drift pile. Mike reached Maddie first and began towing her limp body to shore. Peter joined him, and they combined their efforts to keep her head above water,

while paddling with their legs and free arms. The current washed the struggling swimmers fifty yards downstream before they could wade into shore at a thicket, and pull Maddie onto the muddy ground.

"We have to get the water out of her lungs," Mike groaned, spent with exhaustion. "Collect some brush to prop her shoulders up," he spat. "I'll position her to start the rescue breathing."

Mike straightened Maddie flat on her back, and then swept two fingers through her mouth, to remove any loose debris.

"Nothing in her mouth," Mike pronounced. Peter pushed his collected brush under Maddie's shoulders to allow her head to drop back. Mike pinched her nose before sealing his lips around hers and blowing in forcefully to inflate her lungs. In four breaths Maddie began spitting up water and turning pink. Peter looked to Mike and smiled.

"A few more times, don't you think?" Mike suggested. "Then we'll carry her to the road, and wait for my dad to get here."

Moaning and coughing up more water, Maddie pulled at the ruby necklace and mouthed a few inaudible words. Mike placed his ear close to her lips to listen, before removing her necklace and placing it in his pocket. Peter looked at Mike in amazement.

"She wants me to take it," Mike insisted.

The teens carried Maddie to the bridge, with Mike lifting

beneath her shoulders, and Peter hugging her legs.

"Mike, that was a real snake!"

"Shadows can play tricks this time of day. She's alive, and that's the important thing. We need to get her to the hospital fast."

Flashing red lights confirmed the arrival of Chief DeSorcier's cruiser. He pushed into the brush to help carry Maddie to his back seat.

"How did you two get involved in this scrape?" Chief DeSorcier asked.

"We were coming downtown to Woolworth's. The man who called you said she jumped from the bridge."

"This is gonna take a while to straighten out, but I have his statement. I'll get your story later, Mike. Are you two okay to get home by yourselves?"

"We'll be okay, punch it!"

Chief DeSorcier turned on his siren and sped away. A small group of absorbed bystanders shared their excitement. Peter and Mike plopped down on the riverbank to throw on their clothes.

"Man, you're Tarzan!" Peter whistled. "What a swimmer!"

"What about you, buddy? You called it. She was in real trouble. Lucky for her, you brought us back. She was face down in the water when I got to her."

"You sure didn't tell your dad much."

"As far as I'm concerned, we didn't see anything. Those

jokers might come looking for us if they find out we pulled her from the river."

"What was she mumbling to you?"

"The same thing over and over: 'Don't let them have it'. I think Maddie wants us to keep her necklace safe."

"You should turn it over to your dad."

"Nah, I'm going to keep it. My dad trusts these guys, and he might give it right over to them. I'm going back to her office for the case files."

"What?!"

"It's what she'd want. Look, you head on. I'll rummage through her file cabinet. Come over to my house after you check in, and maybe together we can get some illumination on this entire business."

10

THE GHASTLY VISITOR

UIKING UP HIS DRIVE, MIKE noticed a familiar looking black DeSoto parked across the street from his house. Inspecting the vehicle through its windows, he noted red seats and a heavy odor of stale cigarette smoke. What Whitson's car was doing parked across from his house, Mike hadn't the foggiest. He took down the plate number, UP6561A, before continuing up his drive. Finding the back door unlocked and ajar, Mike entered cautiously. His father was still out on Maddie's rescue call, and Mike blamed Doug for not locking up that morning. He shoved the case files from Maddie's office into the oven's warming drawer.

"Anyone home?" he called out. No answer. Doug was lazy and rarely came home before dark. Mike checked the chore board in the kitchen. In the DeSorcier household, the men rotated cooking and cleaning assignments. Mike rang up Peter on the phone.

"Are you coming over?"

"Soon. What's on the menu?" Peter asked.

"Egg Foo Young, scalloped potatoes, toast and Dr. Pepper Pralines."

Knowing pralines were Peter's sugary weakness, Mike included them on the menu, to seal the deal.

"Okay, I'll be over."

Hanging up the phone, Mike thought he heard a faint shuffle in the back rooms. He called out a second time, without reply. Mike hid Maddie's ruby necklace inside the flour tin.

Heading down the main hall to his bedroom, to change out of his wet jeans, Mike found his room ransacked, his mattress standing on its side, the closet and chairs strewn with clothes. His normally organized collection of magic tricks lay in piles on the floor. The vandals had tossed scarves, cards, paddles, and clothes from his dresser drawers to the walls. He reasoned they might still be lurking somewhere in the house.

Mike stood silently listening for any sound or movement before reaching stealthily inside his closet for his Bowie knife. He tied the sheath to his leg, pulled his wet pants leg down to hide it, and walked into the hall. He was hardly surprised when he discovered Blackthorne and another man sitting on his couch fifteen feet away.

"Funny thing finding my room torn apart and you two weirdos sitting here in the dark."

"I strongly suspect you have something of mine, thief," Blackthorne rasped. "Perhaps I should have Bob shake you

by the ankles until it falls out of your pockets."

Mike sized up Blackthorne's companion. Bob looked an awful lot like Jim Calendar, except for a general wasted sallowness, as if Jim had lost about twenty pounds.

"The only thing in my pockets is a rock, mister," Mike said. "It's nothing to razz your berries, but I'll show it to you."

Instead of reaching into his pocket, Mike lifted his pants leg, curled his hand about the grip of his Bowie Knife and withdrew it from its sheath, holding it forward menacingly.

Blackthorne made an odd noise, a curse, and raised his staff. The snake's eyes glowed red and instantly released a surge of intense light into the metal blade, shocking Mike's hand and forcing him to drop the knife. Bob raced around the table to grab it, but Mike recovered, snatching up the blade to strike a warning jab. Bob unexpectedly grabbed the blade, slicing off a bloodless finger on a hand already missing one finger. Bob tugged backwards, wrenching the knife from Mike's grip. He stooped to casually retrieve his amputated finger from the floor. He offered the knife to Blackthorne, who stabbed it into the wooden armrest of the couch.

"Cease your antics and give me everything in your pockets," Blackthorne commanded, speaking into the staff's red jewel like a microphone. His normally harsh voice was clear and sharp and his order compelled Mike to obediently empty out his pockets. Blackthorne smiled, his teeth,

normally hidden behind tightly drawn pale lips, were long and yellow. His dead eyes fixed on the gray stone Mike had produced.

Udjuk lay defenseless on the coffee table. Blackthorne picked him up and Udjuk suddenly flashed brightly from a thousand pinprick points. Blackthorne's hands shook violently, and he flung Udjuk fiercely towards the opposite wall. Mike's left hand darted out to nab him, as if Udjuk was a line drive ball batted back to the pitcher's mound.

"Where is the necklace the agent was wearing? I know it's nearby. I sense it. It came in with you. Bring it to me, meddler, and I won't burn your eyes out."

"Listen, Blackthorne, let's call it even. You leave me and my friends alone, and I won't tell my dad about you breaking into his house."

"Keep wagging idle threats and I'll rip out your tongue," Blackthorne gurgled through his throat hole. His trembling hands took up his wicked cane, and he held it a foot above his head. The snake's eyes glowed as he searched the room, eventually the staff led him to the kitchen, and finally to the flour tin. Opening the lid, he took out the ruby necklace and placed it in his coat pocket. Blackthorne tipped his fedora hat to Mike, before strolling out the front door, with Bob two steps behind.

Mike watched from his window as they sped away in the DeSoto, Bob driving. Mike pulled his knife from the armrest, the pounding in his chest subsiding, as he

reconsidered who and what he was up against. He turned his mattress over on its box spring, and was almost finished straightening his room, when he heard Peter ring the doorbell. Mike ran to the kitchen for the files and hid them inside his closet, on the top shelf, beneath board games.

Reluctant to admit the probable existence of the improbable, in the form of a real supernatural evil, Mike decided against mentioning Blackthorne's break-in to Peter, for the time-being. He needed a break from the situation, to ponder its implications, to pour over Maddie's files. She'd suggested that the whole Blackthorne affair was at least half supernatural. Time would tell. He opened the front door for Peter.

"Right on time, Chum. Don't mind the mess, some visitors just left. Let's get cooking."

Mike led the way to the kitchen, where he popped leftover scalloped potatoes in the oven and produced a heavy saucepan from the storage drawer. Turning on a burner, he adjusted the flame to low heat, before pouring Dr. Pepper into the pan.

"We'll make the pralines first because they take time and burn easy. Why don't you measure the sugar, and I'll get the marshmallows and pecans."

Peter poured white sugar into the measuring cup, and looked in the cupboards for the brown.

"Do you think there's anything to what Maddie said about these Nephilim guys?" Mike asked as he added the

cups of sugar Peter offered.

"C'mon Mike, call 'em whatever you want, but they give you the zorros as much as they do me," Peter said. "Can I have the leftover Dr. Pepper?"

"Sure, just don't eat all the pralines when we're done."

Peter polished off the Dr. Pepper while Mike, remaining lost in thought, stirred slowly.

"You still on board to visit Jo?" Mike asked.

"I said I was."

"Cool. The candy is almost at the soft ball stage; get me a cup of cold water so I can test."

Mike dropped a bit of the hot sugar into the water, forming a soft ball, and took the ball out of the water to hold in his hand. It flattened into a small pancake and he removed the pan from the fire.

"It's ready, drop those marshmallows and pecans in the syrup."

The teens were dropping spoonfuls of praline candy onto wax paper when Chief DeSorcier came in the front door.

"Hey, Chum, ya staying for dinner? I guess if yer cookin', ya get to eat. What's on the menu?"

"Egg Foo Young and potatoes and Chum's staying," Mike answered. "How's the woman who fell in the river?"

"I drove her to the hospital as quickly as I could. I guess she was attempting suicide, at least that's what I told the doctors. A lot of strange stuff is happening around town lately. Dinner sure smells good. How long do ya think

before it'll be ready?"

"A few more minutes. Where's Doug?"

"He's probably at the Blackthorne Youth meeting. I'm going to change."

Peter's eyes followed Chief DeSorcier out of the kitchen. He was an imposing man.

"Can you set the table while I cut and mix this stuff up?" Mike asked.

Peter set the table, before returning to the stove to help Mike cook the Egg Foo Young. He poured measured amounts of the egg mixture into the small spoonfuls of hot oil Mike added to the pan. Doug entered the kitchen through the back door, wearing Blackthorne Youth khakis.

"What you got up your sleeve for dinner, Clyde?" Doug looked through and over Mike and Peter's shoulders. "What's that stuff? It looks like crap."

"Egg Foo Young, dweeb. Lay dead. I'll call when it's ready."

"Okay, Clyde," Doug said, leaving the kitchen.

"Why did he call you Clyde? Is that your middle name?"

"No, he and his jerk friends call everybody 'Clyde'. He's a terrible cook. You're lucky it's not his night to cook. It'd be like Cheerios and rubbery scrambled eggs. This is about ready. Reach into the cabinet above the breadbox and get a serving dish."

Mike pulled the potatoes from the oven, and placed the Egg Foo Young on the serving dish.

"Put those out on the table, and leave the pralines on the counter. Did you eat any? I'll start making the toast," Mike said, and then shouted, "Dinner's ready!"

At dinner, Peter listened as the DeSorciers gave critiques of each other's meals and cooking skills.

"What do you cook at your house, Clyde?" Doug asked Peter.

"Cut the 'Clyde' stuff for a while, Doug," Mr. DeSorcier scowled. "Chumbucket is our guest, and his name isn't Clyde."

"Mrs. Miller does most of the cooking at Chum's house," Mike said. "She's a good cook. I like her food."

At Mike's mention of a mother's cooking, dinner conversation stalled. Peter looked up from his plate to see three dipped heads. Mothers were not a favored topic of discussion in the DeSorcier household. At age six, when Mike and Peter started boxing in the PAL League, Mike's mother was already living with her new husband in a Menne Alley apartment. Mike cleared his throat.

"I was wondering if I can go over to Chum's house and watch TV?"

"I don't know why not, you live over there anyway. Be back by ten."

Outside, Mike silently rolled his motorbike alongside as they walked to the bottom of the hill on his street. When they were beyond his father's earshot, he kick-started the ancient Triumph Speed Twin.

"I'm going to see Miss Hanson," Mike announced as he raced away. "I'll see you at your house, in a few."

Gliding over the waxed floors at the hospital, Mike and his shadow stole into Maddie's darkened room. He looked over her medical chart. Maddie was listed as a 'suicide attempt'. Mike wondered if the doctors had looked her over carefully, and if they had, did they know what they were looking at. He knelt at her bedside, speaking softly.

"Miss Hanson, it's me, Mike. Your friend, Mike. Can you hear me?"

Maddie's hand felt towards his voice, and she clasped his hand with her smooth fingers, rubbing gently. Her lips and face were puffy and her eyes swollen shut.

"You told me not to let them have the stone, but Blackthorne and one of his goons came to my house and forced me to give it over."

Maddie lifted her index finger and made several dialing motions with it.

"A phone call? I need to make a call..."

She squeezed his hand affirmatively. Then she traced his palm weakly with her index finger, spelling F-B-I.

"Okay, I'll give a call to the FBI. Another thing - can I look at your legs? I want to check for an injury."

Maddie nodded her head in agreement. There were two fang marks in her swollen left ankle. Even an experienced doctor might pass her injury off as a badly bruised and twisted ankle.

"I'd better get out of here. If anyone asks, I'm your nephew, Ricky, okay?"

Maddie squeezed his hand again, and Mike caught the thinnest hint of a smile crossing her lips as he crept from her room. In the hall he looked for, and found, a nurse.

"The lady in Room Six is my aunt, Madeline Hanson. I'm her nephew, Ricky Hanson. Aunt Maddie is the FBI agent in charge of the entire Williamsport area. She's very important at the bureau and actually quite a favorite of the director in Washington, DC, Mr. J. Edgar Hoover. He'll want to know that she's well-taken care of. She's not a suicide attempt," Mike continued. "She was bitten by a snake on her left ankle. That's why she jumped off the bridge, she was running from the snake. Can you have the doctor look at it?"

"A snake bite!?" the nurse exclaimed in amazement. She quickly shuttled into Maddie's room, to discover what the nephew was talking about. When she found Maddie's legs uncovered and examined the ankle carefully she noticed the puncture wounds for the first time. She hurried out of the room to get more information, but she found the hallway ghostly silent and empty. Ricky had vanished into thin air.

11

JO'S ROOM

JO MUNRO WASN'T SITTING IN her dreary homeroom on the last day of school; instead she'd spent the day in her bedroom apartment, listening to her collection of .45 sides, and drinking a bottle of 7 Up, in company with her most constant friends - her diary, her sketchbook and her teen magazines. Curling up on her bed with a bolster pillow tucked beneath her arms, propping her head in the palm of her left hand, Jo was rereading 16 Magazine for the seventeenth time. On the 16 cover, Elvis Presley wore a red coat, gold shirt and two gold rings. His smile was so warm, and the way he held out his left hand was so cool, that Jo thought of Elvis as one of her friends. In an article titled '*Elvis' Advice on How to Enjoy a Date*', she examined the pearls of wisdom he offered. She retrieved her diary, to write down some of her thoughts on his suggestions.

"Dear Diary, Elvis gives decent advice, but there's nothing new in it," Jo wrote. "Meanwhile, it is Day Five in this Pit of Despair. Mike and Peter have promised to come

by after school is out, at noon, and I have confidence they'll come and visit. I think they both like me. I know Mike likes me, he tells me all the time! Mike has nice hair and very even teeth, and Peter is very handsome and sweet. Peter seems to like me, but he's a mystery to me and doesn't say much. I like to watch them play baseball, but I missed their last game which was the city championship. Peter hurt his hand and his picture was in the paper. Sometimes I feel like Peter ignores and avoids me on purpose. I want to know if he likes me or not. Elvis says you should be friends first before becoming romantic. I know it's good advice, but I also think being friends for too long can create trouble for romance."

Jo repositioned herself to stretch out her long legs, adjusting the bolster under her neck, while holding her diary up to read what she'd just written. She thickly underlined the words 'I want to know' a second time, after admitting to herself Peter's possible lack of interest.

"Gosh, I can't get comfortable. Everything in this room is so cramped. Will I ever be free?"

Jo rolled over on her stomach, tugging at the hem of her shorts and eventually pulling them free. She rolled up the sleeves of her pink shirt, and bunched a doubled feather pillow beneath her chest and chin. She put her diary aside and picked up *I6* again. Her unique eyes, the left with a spot of dark blood color in deep ocean gray and the right emerald-green, continued to study the Elvis article for

hidden gems of knowledge. Her portable phonograph diligently managed a stack of .45s on its over-loaded spindle. Jo listened to the records with one part of her mind, while reading the article with another part.

In the middle of The Platters' *'The Great Pretender'* Jo heard a gentle tapping at her window. She locked her diary, and hid it in her top bureau drawer, before folding the magazine back on its spine, and shoving it under her pillow. After quickly evaluating her room for a tidy appearance, she went to investigate the tapping.

Beyond her window's lace curtains, Jo saw a smiling Mike and a bashful Peter. She noticed Mike's new haircut, and thought he looked a little like Elvis in his bright red shirt. Peter looked cute in his jeans and white t-shirt. She cranked open her window and invited both inside. Mike pushed Peter through first, because of his bandaged hand. Once inside, both guys sat like silent lumps looking around her room. Pin-ups of glamorous stars papered her walls, and brushes and bottles arranged themselves neatly on her vanity, vying for space against a large service photo of her father, its frame draped and surrounded by his medals and ribbons. Jo picked up a pair of sunglasses from her bureau and put them on her pert nose.

"I like your new haircut, Mike. It's very fashionable," Jo said.

"I wasn't sure about getting this style," Mike blushed. "I'm glad you like it."

"What do you guys think of these sunglasses? They're Carreras, and they just came out this year. All the movie stars wear them."

"They're okay," Mike said, "but they hide your eyes."

Jo removed the sunglasses and, after putting them away, sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Did they give out grades today?" Jo asked.

"Yes," Peter said.

"What were your grades?"

"An 'A', four 'B's' and two 'C's'."

"What were yours, Mike?" Jo asked.

"Five 'A's' and two 'B's'" Mike said proudly.

"You both did great. I don't know mine yet, but they're not very good, I'm sure."

"I wonder if they'll be good enough to pass," Peter said, realizing he'd said something wrong the instant the words left his mouth.

"I hope so," Jo laughed. "But I'm sure Skinner the Sinner will find a way to pass me. I know he wants me to graduate someday, and get out of his hair, even though he doesn't have any!"

Mike and Peter laughed with her and the stiff air loosened.

"I'm glad you guys came over. It's been boring here in my room, all by myself."

"We're pretty sick of just looking at each other. You look great."

"Thank you, Mike, that's nice of you to say," Jo said. "I know that's the polite thing to say when someone gives you a compliment. I've read a book on poise and manners."

She rose from the bed and went to her bureau, fishing a small booklet out from her sock drawer.

"Let me ask you guys some questions, to see if you have poise and manners."

"Okay, shoot!" Mike challenged. "I like question and answer games."

Jo read aloud from her advice book: "With sleeveless dresses, which goes best? One - a stole, Two - a razor, Three - long gloves?"

"I don't get it," Peter admitted.

Jo scrunched her nose, and read the question a second time, elaborating on the answers for Peter's benefit. "If I'm wearing a sleeveless dress should I wear it with a fur stole around my shoulders, use a razor to shave my underarms, or wear long gloves with the dress?"

"I don't get it," Peter repeated, looking baffled. "Why can't you do all three?"

"A razor goes best," Mike answered.

Jo looked at Mike and beamed.

"That's right, Mike, very good, let me find another one."

Mike leaned over to Peter while Jo searched through her book.

"Score one for me."

Peter suddenly woke up to the fact that they were in a

competition. He looked straight at Jo while she found another question she liked, before continuing.

"If you drop your fork on a date should you...One - pick it up? Two - have your date pick it up? Or Three - ask for another?"

"Pick it up!" Peter shouted, hoping to beat Mike to the punch this time.

"Incorrect," Jo answered. "Mike?"

"Number Three - ask for another."

"Correct," Jo smiled in approval.

Peter whispered to Mike to stop showing off.

"No sharing secrets when you're in a room with others, it's impolite," Jo corrected them, continuing to leaf through the booklet. "Last one coming up. Hmm...here's one - when asked where you would like to go on a date, should you...One - have a plan or two? Two - pick the town's top eatery? Or Three - shrug your shoulders?"

"I would pick the town's top eatery," Peter said confidently.

"So would I," Mike agreed.

"Rude and incorrect. The correct answer is number One - have a plan or two: you should let your date choose among several suggestions you offer, and make sure your suggestions fit within the date budget."

"Wow, dating is a drag," Peter grouched. "It's impossible to remember all those rules, and if you forget even one of them, it can turn into a disaster."

"Baseball has lots of rules and you seem to remember every one of them," Jo countered. "If you forget a rule in baseball you're out, aren't you?"

"Baseball is different," Peter argued.

"How?" Jo persisted.

"Baseball is fun."

"So is dating," Jo said, locking Peter's eyes with hers, and something electric passed between them that caused Peter to drop his gaze and wet his dry lips. He felt oddly unsettled. His stomach fluttered with excitement.

"I think dating is fun," Mike said, batting his eyes at Jo, "especially the good night kiss. What are the rules for that?"

"You tell your date you had a good time, and you say good night at the door - no kiss!"

Jo enjoyed teasing the guys, and an amused glint came into her eyes. She led them into a long discussion on dating and they all agreed 'getting serious' was a bad thing. Jo took them further into the social wilderness. The guys followed her down thorny paths of discovery that included the teenage couples they all knew, unlikely couples, crushes, attraction rating systems, lists of the best and worst dressed students, popularity, movies and sports. Jo twirled the empty 7 Up bottle on the floor in front of her legs while they talked.

"Why don't we play Spin the Bottle?" she suggested. "You guys sit across from each other and I'll spin the bottle. The winner gets to kiss me."

The teens looked at each other and Mike stalled. Answering 'no' was simply out of the question, but a 'yes' was a dangerous proposition.

"Here's the first rule - one spin only," Jo said, smiling at both. "Winner takes all, and you can't tell anybody we played. Those are the rules, simple and easy to remember. Agreed?"

"What kind of kiss?"

"What kind do you want, Mike?" Jo laughed.

"Any kind you're willing to give, but are you thinking a kiss on the cheek, a kiss on the lips, or a French Kiss? We have to know what we're getting into here."

"I'll go in the middle," Jo said. "A kiss on the lips, not a French Kiss."

"I'm game, how about you, Chum?"

"I guess so," Peter rasped with a dry throat.

"Okay, sit across from each other and I'll spin."

The guys re-positioned themselves, staring into each other's unblinking eyes, like gunfighters at high noon, as Jo placed the bottle between them. She leaned over on her knees, and her long blonde hair fell forward, releasing an intoxicating lavender scent and blocking their view of her quick spin. When Jo lifted her head the bottle pointed squarely at Peter.

"Here's your prize, Peter."

Jo leaned into Peter and her pulpy lips pressed to his, collapsing like crêpe and parting softly. Her warm tongue

searched the inside of his mouth, brushing his tongue, as a wisp of her fragrant hair swept across his cheek. The warmth of her body felt wickedly close and her soft chest bumped his gently, like a boat bumping a dock on a mild day. Jo slowly pulled away, smiling at Peter, sharing a promise of more with her eyes. Peter's speechless mouth betrayed the effect of her kiss.

"What just happened?" Mike frowned, recognizing a staged trick when he saw one. "Man, did I ever get the royal shaft!"

"Mike, are you accusing me of cheating?" Jo asked. "Is the spin only fair if you win?"

"I suppose another spin isn't going to happen," he commented.

"That would be against the rules," Jo said, knowing she'd corralled Mike into a bad spot during the swift kiss.

"I thought so," Mike grumbled.

"You're not saying much, Peter. Does a cat have your tongue?" Jo asked lightly. "Did you like it?"

"I'm surprised, I guess, it was nice, yeah."

"Hmm," Jo said, tapping her cheek with her forefinger, "I'm not sure you're impressed."

"Oh, I'm impressed, all right, sure, I'm impressed."

"I'm impressed, too," Mike said, cheering and clapping in the way of a good sport. He'd lost round one but there was always a round two.

"Thank you, both," Jo said with a bow. "What do you

want to do now?"

"We could play Truth or Dare," Mike suggested.

"Ohhh, no," Jo protested, crossing her arms over her chest. "I know where that's going."

"It's too bad you can't leave your house," Peter said.

"We could go to the Atomic Shake."

Peter congratulated himself for being able to return to the conversation.

"That would be nice," Jo said, "but listen, it's unfair for you guys to have to hang out here just because I'm on restriction. Anyway, my mom could be coming home soon and she'd get really mad if she found you guys here. Why don't you two go and bring me back something that won't melt on the way? A burger and fries would be good. Let me give you some money."

Jo shuffled on her knees to her bureau. Mike and Peter made quick gestures and faces to each other while her back was turned. Mike was for staying, Peter for going, and without a word it was quickly settled between them that they would leave. Jo turned around.

"Here's thirty cents, that's enough, right? A burger is fifteen, and fries are ten cents."

"Yeah, that should cover it," Mike agreed. "We'll be back in about an hour."

"Okay, just look for my mom before you knock on the window."

Jo leaned into Mike, pecking his cheek before turning to

Peter and pecking his cheek also.

"Thanks for coming over, I had fun. See you in an hour," Jo said.

Mike and Peter said their good-byes and hoisted themselves out the window, escaping through the concealing trees and shrubs to the street behind Jo's house.

"What a lucky stiff you are. Jo likes you. I don't know why, but she does."

"Why do you say that? It was just a game."

"Chum, how simple are you? Ring-a-ding-ding! Jo rigged the spin so it would land on you, don't you get it?"

"You don't know that."

"Oh, I know it, if I know anything, I know that. Darn it, don't expect me to just roll over. You don't even want her."

An unfamiliar cold creep accompanied the thrill running in Peter's veins, and he turned savagely on Mike.

"I like Jo. You're just jealous."

"You said you thought Karen was cool, and you even invited her on vacation."

"I do like Karen, maybe I like them both."

"Oh, boy, here we go, you're flipping out."

"I am not! Just because I like two girls I'm crazy?"

"If you'd heard yourself saying this a month ago, yes, you'd admit you were going crazy."

"You always think you know what you're talking about, but you don't know squat."

"Okay, there's no sense going on about it. I thought it'd

be fun to go over to Jo's house together, but obviously not. Pretty soon we'll be slugging it out. Let's make a new rule: no more going over to Jo's house together. So let it be written, so let it be done."

"I can live with that."

Neither spoke again until they ordered their malteds at the Atomic Shake counter. Sitting silent at their table, they stared at each other like morose goats, after a head-butting session.

"I don't like not talking," Mike said, finally.

"Me neither. What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, I've been thinking. I think you're right. Blackthorne and his cronies are criminals."

"Criminals? Maddie said they're not even human. They're totally dangerous."

"Blackthorne and one of his thugs broke into my house and took Maddie's ruby necklace. Blackthorne used his cane like a dowsing stick to find the necklace in less than a minute. The guy with him, Bob, grabbed my knife from me, even though it cost him a finger. He didn't give a dang. I saw where another finger was already gone, and there was no blood, at all."

"You cut off his finger and he didn't care?" Peter exclaimed.

"Yeah, at this point nothing surprises me."

"Keep it down," Peter hissed. "Conrad's looking at us from the window, and you can bet he'll run to Blackthorne

or Deck with anything he overhears."

"Watch him while he's making Jo's burger so he doesn't do anything to it," Mike said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Say, speaking of Jo, there was something you said to Maddie that's been eating at me. You said you overheard them saying Jo had a Nephilim mark on her eye. What'd you mean by that?"

"That's what they said. Jo's left eye is cool and all, but it's like it's scarred or something. Maybe that's what they were talking about. Say, do you think she would like some onion rings?"

"I'm sure she would, Chum," Mike sighed. "God help me, I feel a long cruel summer coming on."

As they approached Jo's house the pair scouted for signs of her mother's presence. Finding all was clear, Peter left Mike on the street and rapped on Jo's window. When she cranked the window open she laid a spiral bound sketchbook on the sill. She noticed Peter examining her drawings of dresses and blouses and she took it back quickly.

"Hey bean! I was just sketching. Is that my burger in the bag?"

"I decided to get you onion rings instead of fries. Is that okay?"

"I love onion rings," Jo answered, smiling. "You're so nice and thoughtful. They smell wonderful, thank you."

"You're welcome. I've got to cut out, so I'll catch you

later."

"I get off restriction next Friday. Would you like to do something that Saturday?"

"Sure, I guess so, like what?"

"Which do you like better - the Roller-Rama or Lucky Strike Bowling Lanes?"

"Bowling?"

"Okay, bowling would be nice. Come pick me up next Saturday, about seven, but call first. Feel free to visit or call me before then. We have that new all-number dialing now, mine is 867-5309."

Jo waved good-bye as she cranked the window shut on a shell-shocked Peter. He wandered back through the trees in a daze, to a waiting Mike.

"Jo ... off restriction ... next Friday," Peter mumbled brokenly, " ... bowling Saturday."

"You have a date with Jo?"

"Not a date ... bowling."

Bewitched and perplexed, Peter wanted definite answers for Jo's uncertain intentions. He hunted through his pockets several times for Udjuk, patting himself front and rear.

"Still looking for your pocket knife?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, I can't think of where it might have gone."

"Maybe you need to think about where you last used it."

"I haven't used it recently, but I've been keeping it in the right front pocket of these jeans."

"Your right front pocket? No way, there was only one

thing in the right front pocket of your jeans, and this is it," Mike said, pulling Udjuk from his pocket and flaunting the rock in his open palm. "It's not a pocketknife."

"Give me that," Peter yelled, "get your hands off it."

Peter lunged for the carving. Mike snatched it backwards, holding it up and away from Peter, swatting with his right hand to keep Peter at a distance. Peter grabbed Mike's arm, pulling it downwards, before clawing into his hand to try to loosen his grip on Udjuk. Suddenly the stone flew out of the grapple. The combatants watched in disbelief as Udjuk fell in an arc to the sidewalk, landing on the hard concrete and breaking into two pieces, one large and one small. Peter rushed to the broken stone and picked up both pieces.

"Oh, man, Udjuk's broke in two."

"It's just a rock isn't it?" Mike asked, kneeling beside Peter. "Maybe some glue can fix it."

"Udjuk's not just a rock. He's over a hundred years old and Karen's grandfather loaned him to me and I swore up and down I'd keep him safe. Now he might even be dead."

"Dead? How can a rock be dead?"

"Udjuk can move; I felt him move, just like Karen said. He moves when he agrees with something you think or need to know. He's how I knew Blackthorne's men were coming for us, he convinced me. Without him we might've vanished, like Jim and Leslie."

Peter allowed Mike to take Udjuk's pieces without

argument. One piece was the head and body, and the other was his upraised flipper, broken off where it joined the body. Udjuk seemed to adopt a bravely stoic attitude towards the loss of his flipper. He kept his friendly smile when Mike fit his pieces together.

"I wasn't holding out on purpose," Peter said. "I just thought you'd goof on the whole thing."

"You're probably right. Look, I'll tell Karen and her grandfather it's all my fault, and maybe they'll let you off the hook."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing's going to put Udjuk back together."

"Well, let's go back to your house and I'll call Karen. I'll tell her we want to come over and talk to her about this community fair idea. When we're there I'll explain what happened and take the blame."

Peter sat down in the grass next to the sidewalk, taking off his sneakers and putting Udjuk's separate pieces in different socks.

"He'll be better protected that way," Peter said, walking barefoot, while Udjuk traveled the remaining three blocks home, stuffed in Peter's socks. Peter sat glumly at his dining table while Mike called Karen. When Mike hung up after a brief conversation, Peter stopped batting the sock roll back and forth on the tabletop, waiting for an update.

"Karen said they're cleaning and working in the garden later this afternoon. She's interested in the carnival idea, and

asked if we could come over now. You ready?"

"Sure, we'll go over and take our lumps. I hope she doesn't get too mad."

They were almost at Karen's house when Mr. Croft, Karen's father, spotted the teens and hailed them over to his gas station.

"Getting pretty hot out, where are you two headed?"

"We're actually on our way to see Karen," Peter said. "She invited us over to talk about some things."

"Would you like a cold Dr. Pepper? I'll spot you the dimes."

Mr. Croft handed them both a dime for the Vendo machine, and they inserted their coins and pulled the chrome lever. The small door of the refrigerated machine opened and let out a frosty blast of air that cooled their faces. They pulled the ice-cold Dr. Peppers out and popped the tops with the machine's built-in opener, filling their mouths and throats with gulps of chilled beverage. The sodas tasted like sweetened, carbonated battery acid.

"Those look good," Mr. Croft said. "I think I'll have one myself."

He inserted a dime for himself and took a long pull from the short bottle. The three of them stood and smiled at each other, enjoying a refreshing pause in the middle of the day.

"So what's the big meeting about?" Mr. Croft asked.

"We want Karen to help us organize a community carnival," Mike said. "Mr. Scott had the idea of promoting

a carnival during the week of the Series to raise money to pay for the town hall repairs, and to replace the fireworks that exploded and caused the fire."

"That was some ruckus, all right. The paper said it wasn't too bad, about \$650 total damage. Not small change, but not a fortune, either. What kind of carnival are you guys planning?"

"We need to brainstorm with Karen," Mike said. "I've thought of putting on a magic show. We could sell concessions, and it would be fun to have a midway with rides and games."

"I know a guy who runs a midway. I've done some work on some of the big trucks he uses to haul the rides and booths. If you're interested I'll find his number and call him. I'll ask what he expects to make out of a carnival, and how much profit would be left for the town. He might be willing to come in and set up."

"That sounds great, having some people who really know what they're doing," Peter said, "because we don't."

"Okay, then, I'll give him a call. Just put your empties over in the bottle rack. I want that deposit money. Stop back when you're done with your meeting and let me know what else you decide. Maybe there's something more I can do."

Karen fiddled with the catch on the porch screen as she greeted them. Peter watched her intent brow as she freed the hook, and a cool breeze floated by him into the house.

"Sit down on the couch. I'm glad you're both here."

Karen called to her mother to let her know guests were in the house, while Mike and Peter sat on the couch as directed. Mike had never been in Karen's house. He studied the hanging masks and art objects on the walls.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Karen asked. "A carnival?"

"Yeah, that, and...," Mike hesitated, "I broke the stone you lent to Peter. It was all my fault. I didn't know what it was and I hid it from him. When he saw it we fought over it, and it fell on the sidewalk and broke."

The color in Karen's tawny face drained away. She stared at Peter with pain in her eyes.

"Where's Udjuk? Let me see him."

Peter turned-out the rolled socks and handed Udjuk's pieces to Karen. She wept a few delicate tears as she fit the pieces back together.

"My grandfather will be very disappointed. We must call him."

She carried Udjuk to her mother in the kitchen. Mike and Peter heard their names and Udjuk's mixed together among tones of surprise and sadness. It was plain that they were calling Karen's grandfather in Alaska, and after several minutes Karen returned to the living room.

"My grandfather wishes to speak with you in private, Peter."

Peter rose from the couch with the utmost dread, following Karen into the kitchen to take the offered phone.

Karen and her mother left the kitchen.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Chumbucket, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"That's good to hear, but I hear Udjuk is not so fine. You and your friend Mike were fighting over him, and Udjuk doesn't like conflict. He got all broken up about it."

"Yes, sir."

"Karen told me you were keeping his pieces in your dirty socks, but I don't expect that was very pleasant for Udjuk."

"No, sir, but I wanted to keep his pieces separated so they wouldn't bump into each other and chip and maybe get worse. His two pieces fit together perfectly right now."

"That's good, but it's bad to separate the two pieces. They should be kept together as close as possible. It's like a broken bone for you. The bone has to touch to heal itself, and the same with the stone."

"Yes, sir, the pieces fit together, but they won't stay together."

"Given time, they will stay together. This isn't the first time."

"You mean he's been broken before? How's that possible?"

"Oh, yes, I dropped Udjuk almost fifty years ago when I was about your age, and he broke clean in two. I baked Udjuk in clay to hold his pieces together, and then buried him under a half-ton of pitchblende to speed his healing.

Living stones heal slowly, and it took him five years to heal."

"So, he'll be alright?"

"Oh, Udjuk will be alright, but I'm not sure about Mickey Mantle."

Peter let out a gasp.

"You wouldn't tear Mickey in half, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't hurt Mickey, but the trade created a binding circumstance between Udjuk and your Mickey card. In a similar way, you created a binding circumstance with these evil beings when you interfered with their plans. Perhaps destiny already intended you for its champion, long before leading you into that cosmic entanglement. Entanglements are not always clear at first, but become clearer in time, and we will have to wait and see. Karen is keeping Mickey as safe as possible in his tin box, but she cannot protect him from the consequences of sharing your fate. We will all do our best to work for the best possible outcome."

"How do you know about these men we're having trouble with?"

"I *saw* the trouble. You have said yourself that these are not men, not like we know men. They are not from our world. They are from a nearby world, a different timeline. Time is made up of strands that intertwine, like a thick rope. You could say they're from our future, or our past, but certainly they don't belong in this timeline with us, now. In

the north we call them Noqumiut, Otter-Men, or Soul Trappers, but in other places I have heard them called Nephilim. So we will call them Nephilim. Whatever one calls them they are an ancient evil. A future adversary."

"I wish Mike and I hadn't gone to that stupid meeting, and come in contact with them, and I especially wish we'd walked down some other sidewalk today," Peter mourned. "But I guess it's impossible to go back now. How can I keep Udjuk's pieces touching?"

"Red clay from the earth is good, but only pure clay and then fired. You will think of a way. Whatever solution you come up with, it must only be pure earth, metal, or wood that binds him."

"I can't think of anything at the moment."

"You're a smart young man, but messy. You will have to get better at fixing messes, because you are creating them faster than anyone I've ever known!" Ataninnuaq laughed. "Udjuk won't stay long in the hands of a fool, and you must choose a path of healing for him, just as I did. Your 'doing' did this, and now you must undo it."

"Mike and I are already in a lot of trouble," Peter confessed, and he suddenly spilled the beans. "Those Nephilim tried to grab us, but Udjuk warned me, and the only way to protect ourselves was to shoot fireworks at them, but the town hall caught fire, and..."

Ataninnuaq snorted with laughter, but then his tone became serious.

"Fireworks surrounded and protected you as I foresaw, but the attacks from the Nephilim will continue."

"I don't understand why they have any interest in us at all."

"You hinder their affairs, and they want to be rid of you, but your luck and power are proving very strong. It is amazing that you two defeated them with fire, which is their power. Mike's power is also with fire, and his magical understanding of fire defeated them soundly, but I believe next time they will attack you with *your* power, which is wood. Mike and you, together, make a strong team. Stick close together, do not separate. You should never be alone, in open spaces, after sunset. That is when they prefer to attack their victims," Ataninnuaq paused, seemingly concerned and suddenly deeply serious. "Chumbucket, I see a journey may be required of me. I may need to come to you."

"You would come to me?"

"I would like to see my daughter, my son and my granddaughter, in any event. Pennsylvania is a long way from Alaska. I have a lot to do up here for the fishermen. It may take me some time to get there, but I am in the Army Reserve and I can travel without cost in the jump seat of an Army cargo plane. The planes fly into Ohio, and I can journey to Cleveland to watch the Indians play before I come to Williamsport."

"That would be great because you're the only one,

besides Mike and Karen, I can talk to about these Nephilim. No one else would believe us."

"Trouble will continue to follow you, that is certain. I wish you well. I will come down as swiftly as I can. Ask my family to come to the phone, and I will tell them my plans. Good luck, friend."

Peter called Karen and her mother back into the kitchen, handing them the phone. Karen's heart lifted when she saw the relief in Peter's face, and she rubbed her nose against his. Peter returned to sit with Mike in the living room.

"What did he say?"

"I'll tell you all about it later, but he wasn't mad. Let's wait for them to come back."

Peter exhaled when Karen and her mother returned to the living room, glowing with the news of Ataninnuaq's visit. A lively exchange of carnival ideas began bouncing around the room in the lightened atmosphere. Mike didn't reveal any specific plans for his magic show, but he assured them it would be an amazing spectacle, unlike anything they'd ever seen. Karen and her mother agreed to get started right away with advertising and drumming up community support.

Peter and Mike left Karen's house buoyant as balloons, stopping at Mr. Croft's gas station to give him the promised update on the carnival plans. Mr. Croft volunteered himself and some of his friends to help with carpentry for the stage, and any mechanical or electrical needs. He also promised to

enlist the support of area businesses and gather material donations for equipment and supplies. Peter shared the story of Udjuk's mishap with Mr. Croft, and he asked to see him. He studied the pieces for a bit.

"So a piece of metal might work, according to Ataninnuaq?"

"Yes, metal was okay," Peter said.

Mr. Croft retreated into the darkness of the garage, digging around in his tool chest and picking through his cabinets for a moment. He came back tightening a small band of metal with a screwdriver.

"This hose clamp might do the job, Chum. Hold Udjuk's pieces together tight."

Peter held the pieces as Mr. Croft slid the metal band over Udjuk's body, fitting the tip of his flipper into a hole in the band to keep it fixed in place. He tightened the screw slowly and firmly, and when he'd finished Udjuk was whole again, and secure against movement.

"It's a start, anyway. His pieces are solid together and they won't move. That's as much as I can do. I can't heal a rock, but maybe Ataninnuaq can do more when he gets here."

"Thanks, Mr. Croft," Peter said. "I think it'll do the trick."

He held the repaired Udjuk up for Mike and Mr. Croft to admire, and they all smiled, including, most importantly of all, Udjuk.

12

*T*HE *D*ATE

AFTER TUGGING ON HIS BEST pair of Chinos and a collared shirt, Peter chose his blue Keds over the red ones. Checking himself in the hallway mirror before heading downstairs, he stuffed the slowly mending Udjuk in his pocket, along with three dollars. His parents, conversing across the dining table, lowered their voices when Peter entered the room. Mrs. Miller cleared her throat.

"Peter," she began, "your father informs me you have a date. Who is this girl?"

"It's not a date, mom. I'm going bowling with a friend, Jo Munro."

"Jo Munro, Jo Munro," Mrs. Miller repeated the name, her index finger pressing the corner of her lip, left arm folded across her torso. "Isn't she the same girl who did that dance at the talent show? She seems quite advanced for her age, wild even..."

"Jo isn't wild, mom," Peter interrupted. "She's just different. She asked me to go bowling, and I said okay."

"It's just bowling, Susan," Mr. Miller said, rolling his

eyes at his wife, in mock disbelief. "It's not like he's eloping."

"I don't know if I approve of this girl," Mrs. Miller persisted. "She's very forward and...well, let's just call her *free-spirited*, for her age. I don't think it's ladylike for a girl to ask a boy on a date."

"It's not a date, mom, it's just bowling."

"Be that as it may, I want you home by ten and not one second later."

"Yes, ma'am, thanks. I'll be home on time."

"Bye, son," Mr. Miller said. "How much money do you have?"

"Three dollars."

Mr. Miller took out his wallet and handed Peter some additional dollar bills.

"That's so you won't get caught short on the tab at dinner, and remember to tip fifteen per cent."

"Mind your manners," Mrs. Miller added.

Peter left his house and began the six-block walk to Jo's house down Mulberry Street, briefly crossing the deserted Lycoming College campus. Passing through the college gates, he saw the high turrets of Jo's house, and the light on in her apartment. Arriving, he plodded up the steps of her wide porch to the front door and rang the bell. Inside the house, he heard footsteps approaching soft as a prayer. Jo answered the door, her flowing blonde hair stirring gently in the breeze. She was wearing a black sleeveless halter

dress with white polka dots and a white belt. She looked and smelled wonderful.

"Hi, Peter, can you wait here a minute? I'm not ready yet. I still have to put on my shoes, and I can't seem to find one of the darn things. I've looked through my closet, under my bed and all over the house. I may have to choose another pair, but I really wanted that pair because they match this belt. I might have to wear my black pumps."

Jo smiled, padding off down the dark hallway in her bare feet. A shiver raced through Peter. Jo was a knockout. Inside the deep inner darkness of the living room, muffled voices of men and women mixed and whispered. Peter stepped away from the screen, but not before a woman's voice called out to him from inside the gloom.

"Hi, cutie."

Peter heard her rise from a chair and approach the screen. An attractive woman in a pale green cocktail dress appeared, looking him up and down, while holding a languid cigarette between her fingers.

"My, you're dressed nice. Watcha' got planned for Joey tonight?"

From the room behind her, a man's voice growled an answer, before Peter could respond.

"The same thing all guys have planned for girls, Lenora. Come sit back down."

"Keep your thoughts to yourself, Raymond. This is a nice boy, I can tell."

She studied Peter meditatively, taking a long drag off her cigarette. She turned her head to blow her smoke to the side.

"Joey just came off restriction, you know, but I think she'll be all right with you. You and Joey have fun tonight. Take care."

The woman turned, disappearing into the muddy light, and after a moment, Jo reappeared at the door. Ted Whitson's voice called out from behind her.

"Don't be late getting home, or you'll be grounded again."

Jo twisted her face into a horrible gargoyle grimace, mimicking Whitson.

"Ready to go?" she asked. "I'm ready."

Jo stepped onto the porch carrying a small black purse and a white cotton sweater. She handed her sweater to Peter before turning her back to him.

"Can you put the sweater across my shoulders? It might get cool."

Peter placed the sweater over Jo's shoulders and she took his arm to lead him down the steps and across her lawn.

"Who was the woman at the door?"

"That's Lenora, a friend of my mom's. They're on a double date with the two weirdos. Lenora is with Raymond, and my mom's with Ted Whitson. I hope to God my mother doesn't marry him. I don't like the way he looks at me. I caught him snooping around my bathroom, collecting hair from my brush. He said he was throwing out the trash, but I

watched him through my window. He put the trash bag, with everything he'd collected, into his car before he drove away. Trash goes in a can, not in a car. If I walk through a room the creep looks me up and down," Jo said fiercely, and then stopped herself. The corner street light flickered on in the departing dusk and Jo locked her arm in Peter's, pulling herself close in against him.

"I don't want to talk about Ted Whitson. I'm just glad I'm out of that house and off restriction. The stars are starting to come out, that's Venus," Jo said, pointing to the deepening sky. "It's the morning and the evening star. Do you know any constellations?"

"I know the Big Dipper and how to find the North Star," Peter said. "Do you know any others?"

"I know the Pleiades, and Orion, but they're not visible yet. Maybe we can stop and stargaze for a little bit, on the way home."

On East Third Street, Peter and Jo strolled past storefront windows reflecting the headlights of passing cars. Inside the open door of a neighborhood bar they glimpsed young men armed with cue sticks stalking billiard balls across green felt pool tables. A few old men sat on padded stools watching the games, and another group of men leaned across the Formica top bar, flirting with the barmaids. Peter saw Mike's mom working at the bar's far end, but he didn't mention her to Jo.

"Where would you like to eat?" Peter asked.

"I thought you would never ask. I could go for Tony's Pizza, or hamburgers at the bowling alley, or chicken-in-a-basket at Martinetti's. Martinetti's is a little more expensive, but they have linen tablecloths, steak and seafood. I think we're dressed well enough to go there, if you want."

It suddenly dawned on Peter that he might, in fact, be on a date. Jo was in a nice sleeveless dress, and she'd just given him several dining suggestions. He knew she'd be okay with pizza or hamburgers, but Martinetti's was clearly her favored choice.

"Why don't we go to Martinetti's?" Peter decided. "Chicken-in-a-basket sounds good."

Jo beamed, pressing Peter's hand with hers. "Martinetti's is nice. I think it'll be fun, and we should still have time to bowl after dinner."

The restaurant was several blocks away, and they passed a long line of people waiting to get in the movie theater to see *'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'*.

"I've seen that movie," Peter said. "It's about these seed pods that come to earth and replace humans. There's only one couple who knows what's happening, but they're too scared to tell anyone else, because nobody will believe them. Even their friends are turning into pod people, so they don't know who they can trust."

"What happens to the couple?"

"The girl becomes a pod person and the guy runs around trying to warn everybody, but a truck loaded with more pods

drives into town, and then the movie ends."

"That's not a very happy ending. Usually the couple gets away and saves the day."

"Not in this story," Peter said flatly.

When they arrived at Martinetti's Peter held the door open for Jo. A man in a suit and tie greeted them as they entered, along with a rush of cool air.

"Reservation name, please?"

"We don't have reservations," Jo said. "We were hoping there might be a table available."

The man raised one eyebrow, before lowering his eyes to study his reservation book.

"We suggest reservations, but I'll see what I can do."

He disappeared through the cocktail lounge to search for a table.

"Here, give him this dollar when he comes back," Jo said, folding one into Peter's shirt pocket. "He'll find us a good table."

"A dollar? What for?"

"Peter, it's a nice restaurant. He's maître d' in charge of the tables and reservations, and it's how things are done. Slip him that dollar, and insist on a nice table near the fireplace."

"A dollar," Peter said sorrowfully.

When the maître d' returned Peter approached him as instructed, with the bribe, and he didn't hesitate to ask for a table near the fireplace. Peter felt he should get some value

for Jo's dollar. The man lifted the dollar from Peter's fingers and smiled.

"Right this way, sir. May I say, madam, that you look exquisite this evening."

Peter remembered to let the lady go first, and the sweeping arm of the maître d' motioned him in behind Jo. They were seated at a fine table just to the side of the fireplace. The restaurant's modern design included stone masonry, an indoor waterfall, a goldfish pond and a live lobster tank as an elegant backdrop to the dining area. Jo guessed at Peter's thoughts as he surveyed the half-empty room.

"It's still early for dinner reservations, but more people will start coming in. This is the best table in the room, and the fire and music are both lovely, thank you. The ambiance is worth every cent."

Peter didn't know the meaning of the word 'ambiance', but he smiled at Jo and she smiled back as they picked up their menus.

"Great Caesar's Ghost!" Peter exclaimed. "Look at these prices, a hamburger is a dollar twenty-five!"

Jo touched his hand reassuringly, holding his eyes with hers.

"Peter, the dinner plate includes fries," she explained softly. "This is a real restaurant, it's not the Atomic Shake, and Conrad Bolger is not your waiter. You look nice. You look like you belong here. Please don't raise your voice like

that and embarrass us."

Peter returned to his menu, silently vowing to tighten up his act through the rest of the meal. He told himself it was like making an error in baseball, put it behind and focus on what was in front of you. The waiter came to the table to take their order.

"I'll have the chicken-in-a-basket," Jo smiled, "with a Seven-Up."

"I'll have that also," Peter agreed.

The waiter took their menus. They sat through an awkward moment of silence, sipping on their waters. An oval bar in the adjacent cocktail lounge surrounded a piano, where a red-haired woman played and sang '*What Is This Thing Called Love?*'.

"I read in the paper this morning that the coaches named you to the All-Star team," Jo said. "Congratulations. Mike is also on the team, and when he called me this morning I congratulated him as well."

"Why did Mike call you?"

"He's planning a magic show, and he wants my help as a stage assistant. He plans to stuff me in a mummy case, kill me and bring me back from the dead."

"He mentioned performing magic for the carnival, but I didn't know he had a specific trick in mind."

"What's the carnival for?"

"It's to raise money for the town. Karen and her parents are doing a lot of the work. Mr. Croft convinced a midway

company to bring twelve rides and eighteen game booths to town for the entire week."

"Karen is such a go-getter. What do you think of her?" Jo asked softly. "I don't know her well. You two seem to spend a lot of time together in school."

"Karen's swell. She's the best lab partner a guy could ask for."

"She's also one of the cutest," Jo noted. "Or hadn't you noticed?"

"Noticed what? How cute she is?" Peter repeated in surprise, before pausing to consider Jo's question. "Well, sure I've noticed, but what difference does that make in a lab partner?"

"I guess none," Jo said with a puzzled smile.

Their waiter brought out dinner salads, grinding fresh pepper over the Catalina dressing. He set their soda glasses beside the fine china. Peter said grace before sipping his soda, and Jo made a noise to get his attention.

"Peter, I dropped my salad fork."

Jo mystified Peter. Why would she tell him this? He thought perhaps she wanted him to pick it up for her, and he started to rise from his seat, but suddenly he remembered a recent lesson in etiquette. He repositioned himself, as if it was never his intention to rise. He gave Jo his clean salad fork and she smiled, taking her napkin off the table and unfolding it in her lap.

"Waiter, can I have a new salad fork?" Peter asked. "I

dropped mine."

"Yes, sir, right away."

"Thank you, Peter, you're such a gentleman. I like that you said our grace. My father always said grace before our meals, when he was home."

Well played, sir, Peter congratulated himself on remembering his manners. Taking his napkin off the table, and placing it over his lap, he watched Jo cut and nibble small bites of her salad.

"So you're part of the carnival planning?" Jo asked. "It sounds fun."

"I didn't have any choice, really."

"I guess I can help, too. I hope we get to work together."

"If I know Mike, he'll use his magic to make you disappear, and I'll never see you again."

"Mike asked me to come over and work with him this evening, but I told him I was going out on a date with you."

Peter nearly choked on a sip of his Seven-Up, but he managed to compose himself. He was certain Mike knew he and Jo were going bowling on this night. Peter cut into his salad and changed the subject.

"Do you know Mr. Scott, our league commissioner?" he asked.

"Not very well," Jo said. "I've said hello at the baseball games, and at the dance studio. His daughter is taking dance lessons with me. He and his wife seem nice."

"An article in the paper this morning said he was doing

something wrong with the league's money. It's all lies, and I think I might know who's spreading the lies."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you everything I know, or why I know it," Peter answered mysteriously, "but I do know there are men who want to get rid of him as the head of our league."

"*'The Plot to Get Mr. Scott'*," Jo teased. "Maybe that's a title for a paranoid movie, like the one you were just telling me about. A lot of movies are like that, these days."

"It's not paranoia if someone's really out to get you," Peter retorted.

When the waiter set down his dinner plate, Peter looked at his meal in confusion. A large pale lump of meat sat covered in cabbage and carrots. He looked over at Jo's plate for a comparison, and the meals were identical.

"This isn't what we ordered," Peter exclaimed. "What is this?"

"Chicken-in-a-basket. What did you expect?"

"I thought it would be fried chicken in a basket of french fries."

"No, silly, it's chicken cooked in a basket of foil, stuffed with vegetables. It's good, try it."

Peter's first suspicious cut into the chicken breast released an aroma of seasonings, and he brought a small piece to his mouth. The chicken was juicy and savory, and he cut another piece, then another. He was hungry and he ate quickly, but Jo picked at her food, leaving it mostly

untouched. The conversation tailed off while they ate, but Peter enjoyed the smooth music from the singer in the cocktail lounge.

"The chicken looks good, but I don't think I can finish it. My stomach is queasy," Jo said. "We should get going. It's a little after eight, but if we hurry we can still bowl."

Peter asked their waiter for the check, and he managed to keep his heart from skipping beats as he laid five dollars, tip included, on top of the table. After rising from his chair to leave, he was about to walk past Jo's chair, when he halted. Turning quickly to attend to her, he placed her sweater on her shoulders, before pulling her chair back as she stood. They left the dining room as a couple, strolling past the lobsters, the waterfall, and finally the maître d' at his podium.

"Thank you," said the maître d'. "Please come again, and have a pleasant evening."

Outside the restaurant, cool moist air bathed their faces.

"Do you feel the rain coming?" Jo asked. "The weather report said there wouldn't be any until later tonight."

Standing in Martinetti's parking lot Peter watched Jo's eyes fix on the distant bowling alley's bright lights. A wild wisp of her hair whipped rebelliously away from her blonde mane, and the outlaw strand touched her left cheek, sticking briefly. Jo pulled the fine thread back into her thick tresses, and smiled when she noticed Peter studying her.

"Let's hurry to the bowling alley," she said. "I've waited

so long to get out and have some fun."

Prodding each other into a fast walk, they soon found themselves near the entrance to the alleys, a two-story wall of glass rising majestically into a sky of dark royal blue. The scarlet canopy over the double doorway cast a halo of light over the entrance, and bright yellow letters, half the size of a grown man, invited them into the lanes with a one word proclamation, *BOWLING*.

The thump and crash of thunderous balls, combined with clattering echoes of falling pins, welcomed Peter and Jo inside the alley. Standing on the plush scarlet carpet, they craned their necks, looking for open lanes, and found none. Peter approached an attendant disinfecting rental shoes at the counter, while Jo kept her eyes peeled for any familiar faces among the bowling parties.

"Six parties are ahead of you," the attendant said. "It'll probably be forty minutes, do you wanna put your name on the list?"

"Yes, Miller, please, thanks."

"We'll call your name when a lane comes open."

Peter left the counter frowning, and found Jo standing on the steps leading down to the lanes, her eyes still searching the crowd. He touched her shoulder and shouted above the noise.

"I don't think a bribe will get us a lane," he informed her. "It's a forty minute wait for one to open."

"Isn't that Mike and Karen on Lane Three?" Jo asked.

"That's Mike bowling now."

Peter looked up just as Mike was celebrating a strike. He wondered what Mike was doing at the bowling alley.

"Let's ask if we can join them," Jo said.

Stepping down from the concourse into the lane area, Jo made a quick beeline to where Karen sat at a scoring sheet table, grease pencil in hand. Peter slowly brought up the rear, curious about why Mike wasn't surprised to see them.

"Hi guys," Jo said. "Can we join you? There aren't any open lanes."

"Sure," Mike answered readily, "always room for good friends. It's okay with you, right Karen?"

"Fine by me. Hi Peter. I'll just add your names below ours; we're in the third frame. You can bowl three times in a row to catch up, and then we'll take turns. Do you want to play teams?"

"I like teams," Jo said. "Peter and I will be a team, won't we?"

"Sure, but we need to get some shoes first, and take our name off the wait list. See you guys in a minute."

Jo and Peter returned to the front desk.

"What size shoe do you wear?" Peter asked. "Are you a good bowler?"

"A size seven. I'm pretty good; I used to bowl here with my dad, in a father-daughter league. Why?"

"Because I want to beat Mike. A woman's seven, and a man's ten," Peter announced to the counter attendant, "and

remove Miller from the waiting list. We're joining the couple already bowling in Lane Three."

In the glare of the light at the counter, Jo studied Peter. His jaw muscles stiffened, as he pulled savagely at his laces to loosen them.

"Why would you say that?" she asked.

"Why would I say what?"

"That you want to beat Mike. Why is that so important?"

"It's not. I just want to beat him, that's all. I think he deserves a good beating."

Jo claimed her bowling shoes from the counter. Peter, without waiting for Jo, carried his pair to a chair in the concourse to change. Shoes finished, they selected their bowling balls. Jo chose her ball because it was pink, while Peter chose his because it was the heaviest he could find.

"Let's get the game started," Peter said.

"What's eating you, Peter? I didn't know you were so competitive. I just want to have fun."

"Winning is fun. Let's have some fun."

When they returned to the lanes, Mike scooted on the bench to make a space for Jo, beside him.

"You're up first, Jo," Peter said, taking the space Mike had set aside for her. "Throw a strike."

Jo picked up her pink ball from the return. Taking her time to set herself correctly, she bowled a strike straight away, clapping her hands and performing a small dance while her friends cheered. She picked up a spare in the

second frame, and nine pins in the third.

"I'll get some sodas all around and onion rings for you, Jo, while Chum bowls his frames," Mike said.

"I love onion rings," Jo said. "How did you know? You're so nice, Mike."

"Anything else, Karen? Chum?"

"No, thank you," Karen said.

"I'll take a new best friend," Peter grumbled.

"I'll see if anyone's interested," Mike replied, "but you might be a hard sell."

Mike left and both girls looked over at Peter, before exchanging questioning looks with each other.

"Just kidding," Peter said, taking up the massive cannonball he'd chosen. He hurled a meteor that crushed the tidy formation of frightened pins, sending them scattering in all directions. A strike. His chest swelled in dark satisfaction, propelling him to throw even harder in his second frame. The hard-driving ball flew late into the gutter both times, once to the right and then to the left. He managed nine pins in the third frame.

"I don't believe it," Peter groaned, returning to his seat. The score stood seventy-one for Mike and Karen to sixty-seven for Peter and Jo.

"I think your ball is too heavy, and you're throwing too hard," Jo pointed out. "You seem mad about something."

With the scoring caught up, they waited for Mike to return from the concession area so play could begin again

in the fourth frame.

"You look nice, Jo," Karen commented. "Where did you guys go, before bowling?"

"We had dinner at Martinetti's. Peter *was* a perfect gentleman," Jo said. "Notice I'm using the past tense." The girls studied Peter as he brooded on the molded fiberglass bench. "I wonder if he'll ever be one again."

Karen and Jo praised Mike, upon his return with the concessions. Peter ignored the food for three frames, before he began snatching onion rings from the basket, but only when Mike's back was turned. The game tightened up in the ninth and tenth frames.

"If you strike on this ball we win the game," Peter reminded Jo on her last ball. "You're on a roll of spares, doing great."

Exhaling, Jo approached the line in perfect form, releasing her ball down the alley to strike the head pin dead center. Her friends' wide eyes followed the kicking pins. The last one toppled and spun, but missed the remaining three pins standing in the corner.

"Oh! So close," Peter yelled, giving Jo a hug. "Good game, partner."

Mike and Karen won the game two-twenty-five to two-twenty-three. The brightly lit alley clock said ten after nine.

"We should get going," Jo announced. "We had fun and thank you so much for letting us join you."

Mike and Peter shook hands while Jo and Karen hugged.

Karen made a point of touching noses with Peter. Mike lingered holding Jo's hand, while saying good night.

"This was really great," Karen smiled. "The four of us make a fun set."

"Yeah, we should do more stuff together," Mike agreed, "like see flicks or go swimming or just hang out."

"My first night of freedom and I'm already booked for the summer," Jo clapped. "It'll be great."

"We'll be on restriction the whole summer, if we don't get going," Peter interrupted, seizing Jo's hand. "See you later, alligators."

Leaving the bowling center, Peter and Jo found the weather turning against them. Each passing minute cooled the air, and in the far distance, they saw flashes of lightning. They began walking briskly in double-time, but near Jo's house they slowed, before finally halting in the dark at the corner of her lot. Distant street lamps spilled small pools of light on the black pavement.

"I enjoyed tonight, Peter. I think I know you better. You're usually so cheerful and easy-going, but you have a dark and moody side."

"I don't like losing, if that's what you mean. I'll always try to win."

"What was going on between you and Mike? It wasn't just about bowling, was it?"

"No. Mike pushes things too far sometimes, and he knows it. It's no big deal."

"I wondered if it was because of me. I don't want to cause trouble between the two of you."

Jo arched her neck to view the stars in the black night overhead, watching a few gray clouds scudding across the moon.

"The stars seem so close to me," Jo said. "Looking at them makes me feel a little less alone. I like sharing them with you."

Peter's hand touched Jo's face, tracing the line of her pulpy lower lip, to the point where it melted into her soft skin. Her warm body smelled good of the soft scents of flowers and soap.

"I guess this is good night," Peter rasped.

Jo smiled softly and leaned into Peter's shoulder, encouraging him to embrace her by looking into his eyes, and then closing her own. Her expectant lips were met by his, and they exchanged a lingering kiss in the secret dark, before Jo abruptly broke away. She back-pedaled a few steps towards her door, laughing.

"I have to go in now, Peter. I just broke the first rule of dating, and that's enough rule-breaking for one night. Call me whenever you want, or whenever you think about me. I had so much fun, good night."

Jo blew Peter a kiss from the top of her steps, and he waited as she unlocked her door and slipped inside. Peter wasn't sure if Jo was faking him out or not, but she'd seemed to genuinely enjoy herself. At any rate, he'd done the best

he could on their first date, and he resumed his own journey home.

Near the college gates the skin on his neck prickled, as if in warning of someone, or something, watching him. He stopped to look around and listen, but there was no sound except the barking of a neighborhood dog, and no movement except the growing violence of the wind in the leaves. He remembered Ataninnuaq's warning: you should not be alone, outside, in the deep night. Peter started walking again, and then he began to run.

13

THE CREMATORIUM

LENDING THEIR BOWLING DATE AT Brandon Park, Karen and Mike sat on swings, facing in opposite directions, speaking in turns, as they swept past one another.

"Remember the news report about the FBI agent... jumping from the bridge?"

"Yes?"

"Chum and I are the unidentified teenagers... who pulled her from the river..." Mike confessed. "She gave me access to her files "

"Mike...really?"

"Okay, so she sorta authorized me...anyway, you're pretty smart...about stuff. Hold up..."

Mike planted his shoes in the dirt, scraping and scudding to a stop. Karen followed suit.

"I've read through a lot of her files and they make connections between Blackthorne's crowd and the biblical fallen angels. She calls them Nephilim. Like, they lost their souls, and they're evil. The reports say it right out like that."

Karen gripped the chains and launched herself from the swing.

"I believe you. My grandfather has lots of stories about evil beings he calls Noqumiut. He even fashioned weapons for us to use if we ever came against them."

Karen reached into the deep pocket of her dress, producing a two-pronged barb for Mike, who felt the weapon's sharp tip and edges.

"It's made of whale bone, but anything once used by a living animal - bones, fur, teeth, claws - can probably weaken these Nephilim, *if* they're similar to the Noqumiut. I have a few more things like this at home. You can have this one."

"Thanks. I hope I never have to use it," Mike said, stuffing the harpoon tip in his pocket.

A peal of thunder rolled in the distance, quickly followed by an agitated wind that shook the dark trees.

"It's almost curfew," Mike said, picking up his helmet, and leading the way to his motorbike.

"Thanks for asking me out. I had fun bowling, and the pizza was great, too."

"I'll ride you home, but I want to swing by St. Boniface Cemetery first, because there's something I want to investigate."

"A late night ride by a cemetery, on a motorbike. How adventurous!"

Helmet on, Karen waited until Mike was stable on his

bike, feet planted, before stepping on the near footpeg and swinging her leg over the seat. She wrapped her arms around his waist. Mike zoomed away, over the gentle slopes of the park, until they were on the side streets. Leaning with Mike into the turns, Karen kept her line of sight over his shoulder, always in the direction he was turning. The feel of the rushing wind was freeing and exciting.

Mike slowed before turning onto a narrow dirt path winding through a copse of trees. Fifty yards in, he stopped and removed his helmet, instructing Karen to do the same, while he pushed his bike into hiding. After skirting the edge of the woods, they hiked another hundred yards across open fields, arriving near the cemetery gates.

"I want to know what Whitson's up to. We need some hard facts if we're ever going to bring this situation to my dad. Chum insists that my dad's mixed up with their plans, but I don't believe my dad knows how bad they are. He won't listen to stuff about souls and spirits, but he'll listen to reason, I think. I need to catch them kidnapping somebody, or find physical evidence that ties them to the kidnapping of Jim and Leslie."

Mike and Karen crept inside the cemetery gates, trekking deeper and deeper in among the rows of monuments and headstones. Halfway through, Mike pointed out a dim red glow on the far side of the cemetery. Karen halted and stared at him dubiously, shaking her head without saying a word. Mike took Karen's hand to encourage her to keep going. As

they drew closer to the light source, they realized the red glow was coming from several high narrow windows at the rear of the Whitson Crematorium. Exiting the cemetery, they halted on the sidewalk near a large hedge, peeking through the brush at the seemingly deserted building.

"We have to go around back," Mike said. "You game?"

"Mike, you're insane! You can't go spying on other people's property late at night, especially not a funeral home."

"Blackthorne didn't ask my permission when he and his buddy Bob broke into my house. I'm pretty sure they were driving one of Whitson's cars."

Mike and Karen slipped down the hedge line to the parking lot, dodging alongside a long arched awning covering the back entrance to a loading dock. Two heavy black cars glistened in the moonlight, one was a black Cadillac hearse, and the other was a familiar black DeSoto.

"Give me a minute and I'll know what I want to know."

Mike raced in a crouch to get behind the DeSoto and read its license plate: UP6561A. Satisfied, he hurried back to where Karen waited for him in the loading area.

"It's the same car that was parked in front of my house when they broke in. It's Whitson's car; I'm sure of it."

"How do you know?"

"I wrote down the plate number. I knew I would see it around town again. You notice the numbers on the plate make a '666'? Mark of the beast."

"I only see two sixes."

"Five plus one is also six. Six-six-six," Mike explained. "It's all in the files. They communicate with each other, using numbers and symbols. So, now we know Whitson is letting them use his car. What else is he up to? I want to look in those windows with the red lights."

"Mike, the bottoms of those windows are at least eight feet off the ground, and the lights are probably from the crematory fires. We can't see in the windows, and it's getting late. We'll both be in big trouble."

"It'll just take a second. We're here and the time is now. I'll lift you up to stand on my shoulders, so you can peek in."

The idea of espionage secretly excited Karen, and she ran to the side of the building with him. Climbing up on Mike's shoulders without further protest, and leaning against the wall, she clawed and scratched her way up the rough brick, as Mike pushed until she could peer over the ledge of the window. Inside the room, tubing connected six large rectangular vats filled halfway with a red liquid. The vague outline of bodies lay submerged in the thick swirling baths, but one vat was empty. The room's concentrated red light nauseated Karen within moments.

"Let me down, Mike," she pleaded. "I'm sick, and I feel like I'm going to throw up, hurry."

The support of Mike's shoulders and his grip at her ankles suddenly vanished. Her head dropped below the

window, leaving her clinging to its ledge.

"Mike!" Karen hissed, turning her chin to her shoulder, to see behind her. "Where are you? Don't leave me hanging, get me down."

She felt oily fingers grasp her bare thighs to tug her down. Instinctively, she fought to hang on, scraping her hands on the rough brick, but she finally let go of the ledge. An unfamiliar grip held her arms like a straitjacket, lowering her feet to the ground.

"Can I help you?" a high-pitched voice whined. "Where's your boyfriend? Oh, right! He's out cold. Careful with your step, honey, don't trip over him."

When her captor turned Karen around, she confronted what was unmistakably Jim Calendar's animated corpse, speaking to her in a queer high voice. His missing flesh, the intense red light, the pressure of his arm wrapping her waist like an elephant's trunk, were all too much for Karen, and she retched her dinner on Mike, unconscious on the ground. Hours old digested pizza splattered his face and shirt.

"Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry, so sorry."

"Right. Mike! That's his name! I remember him now. Don't worry about him. He's fine," Jim assured her. His decomposing hand clasped Karen's mouth as he muscled her through the building's rear door. "Don't yell or try to run, 'cause if you do I'll make sure Mike gets it good."

Jim hustled Karen down an interior hall to a room with leather chairs and a couch. A large white gift box sat on a

mahogany table.

"Sit!" Jim commanded, shoving the table aside, and pulling a corner chair close. "Do you remember me? Your good old friend Jim? I remember something about you, Karen. I remember seeing you in the halls. Just a wee bit. These bodies gradually lose their memories, as the brains rot. If someone's fresh when we take 'em, we get to keep some of their memories."

Jim began humming '*Thanks for the Memories*', idly stroking Karen's hair. The sight of him, the sound of his discolored smacking lips and bloated tongue were awful to bear. She jerked her head from the touch of his hand, dropping her eyes and hardly daring to breathe at all, as he began to sing:

*We who could laugh over big things,
were parted by only a slight thing.
I wonder if we did the right thing,
thanks for the memories.*

"Jim liked that song. He was kind of a sentimental guy. You know, Karen, I'd like to be an entertainer someday, after we've rid the world of most of you, and seized control. That's what it's all about. Control. We want control. Truth is, I'm not as much of a control freak as Blackthorne. But the other truth is, we always lie. Since entering your realm, I've discovered my artistic tastes. But what chance does Blackthorne ever give me to express myself? Not once! Not on your life! But I've taken to writing songs and poetry, on

the sly, and I'm getting pretty good at the game. Maybe 'Wolfman Jack' and I will bake a biscuit together, and he'll play it on his radio show- 'Here's the newest hit from your teen heart-throb, Bob! 'Someday I'll Be You, After You're Dead and Gone'. Performing tonight from inside Jim Calendar's decaying body! You can call me Jim-Bob!"

Jim-Bob looked up at the ceiling dreamily, and continued his humming as he shuffled behind Karen's chair.

"You want to know how we get inside you and take over? It's through the optic nerve. Zip, and we're in your brain. You're evicted! If we want to keep your soul around for a while until we can use it, we'll just toss you in a ruby to chill. Your soul is who you are, you know. Not your body. Souls are tasty."

Every muscle in Karen's body tightened when she heard the clink of his belt buckle unfastening.

"I know what you're thinking, Karen: 'Ol' Jim-Bob is just a crumbling corpse. What a fool he is! No modern teen girl would ever worship a rotting meatsack like Jim-Bob!" Truth is, Karen, I know I'm no teen heart throb right now. I dig that I need a new body, and I'll get one when things are more permanent around here. Right now all I can do is dream:

*I need you so that I could die,
I love you so and that is why
Whenever I want you, all I have to do is
Drea-ea-ea-ea-eam,
Dream, Dream, Dream,*

Drea-ea-ea-ea-eam"

Jim-Bob finished unfastening his belt, sliding it slowly from his waist loops, folding the belt in half and giving it a loud 'snap'!

"Jim's body has had a rough time, let me tell you. I don't like it much. I'm certainly not in love with it. I don't like the way it's falling apart, but so was the body before Jim's. That damn Mike cut off Jim's finger! I don't know if I like Mike or not. I kinda like him, and I kinda hate him. Blackthorne did so many experiments on poor Jim, he started coming apart at the seams almost immediately. Humans are okay, but there's better. I'll tell you what I really do love, and that's things that are smooth and flexible. Chains are the best because they move like a snake. I love being a snake and biting people. Sometimes Blackthorne lets me do that. You should try it sometime, Karen. Strip naked, lie on your belly and slither through the grass. Rarr!"

Jim-Bob pulled Karen's arms behind her back, binding them together at the elbows with his belt, twisting the bright blade of Mike's Bowie knife in front of her face.

"I picked this off dumbass Mike. If you ever see him alive again, tell his dumbass he should hide his things better. I knew he kept it strapped to his leg, from the last time we met."

Jim-Bob yanked on the belt until it cut into Karen's arms. He poked the belt leather with the knife point, working the tip back and forth to poke a new hole. The last punch nicked

Karen's arm, and blood trickled over the leather as he pushed the belt prong through to the buckle.

"Ah, you're so yum-m-my," Jim-Bob stammered, his hands shaking as he wiped her blood from the leather. "Nothing like scared blood! We can taste the fear in your blood, and it tastes grrrrreat! Everything's so dull where I come from. Blackthorne's a jerk, and he never let's a guy cut loose!"

Jim-Bob kicked the table leg sullenly, his face tightening, twisting and twitching. Gathering Karen's hair in a tight bunch, he yanked her head back to look into his yellowed eyes, holding the blade to her throat.

"What's wrong with a little excitement? Why can't I wear a sports shirt?"

Removing the blade at Karen's throat, Jim-Bob released his tight hold on her hair. Her eyes followed him as he prowled like a panther in a zoo cage. In her grandfather's stories about unnatural beings, the best chance to survive was a minute at a time, often for days or weeks, stringing together enough small moments to get lucky. The heroines usually asked the monsters riddles or told stories or performed tricks. Karen encouraged Jim-Bob's complaining with nods and sympathetic understanding.

"Blackthorne's stuck in the past: the 'ancient ways' he's always saying. I say the ancient ways and a dime will get you a cup of coffee! Ha, ha, that's a joke. I know what a joke is," Jim-Bob paused until he received an appreciative nod

from Karen. "Not many of us do, you know. Just try to get a laugh out of a Nephilim audience in a comedy club. They'll eat you alive! Ha, ha. That's another joke! You know, Karen, you're a great listener. I wish we could be good friends."

Karen turned away involuntarily from his foul breath, hiding her face behind her hair and shoulders. Frowning, Jim-Bob shuffled to the far side of the room, as if embarrassed that he was so offensive to her.

"Blackthorne'll come back in a few hours for his body, and then he'll decide what to do, but it's probably off to Skytop, with the two of you, for experimentation. Seriously, Karen, I wish you luck. If you aren't ground into meat, I might get your body. We try to keep the best ones for last. I'll go fetch Mike, and we'll continue our nice visit."

After Jim-Bob disappeared down the hall, Karen propelled herself up from the chair with a push of her legs, quickly scanning the room for anything useful. She read the card on the gift box that was lying on the side table: 'For your birthday, Margaret. Love, Ted'.

Karen turned her back to the box, lifting the corner to reach inside, and her fingers ran through soft fur. A picture of a somber Ted Whitson hung above a desk, and there was an open check register on top of the desk. She glanced at the visible page of deposit receipts and saw the numbers of three large checks from Blackthorne-Triangle Capital deposited to the Whitson Funeral Home account. Then,

through the open door, she saw a phone sitting on a stand in the hall.

Karen dashed to the phone, turning her back so that her hands could seize it. Knocking the receiver from its cradle, she counted the holes with her index finger, fitting it into the last one on the dial, '0' for the town operator.

"Come on," she whispered to herself, "come on, do it, do it."

Turning the phone's stiff dial sent it sliding across the table and crashing into the plaster. The receiver fell, dangling halfway to the floor, swinging and banging the wall. Karen heard footfalls racing up the back steps at the loading dock.

"Oh, my god."

Karen fought the belt's hold, bouncing and thrashing against the opposite wall. Her shoulders sank when the back knob turned and the door opened.

"Karen! There you are," Mike said, sticking his head inside.

"Mike! What, how? That ghoul is coming back. We've gotta get out of here."

"That ghoul is dead."

"Dead?"

"That harpoon you gave me really works, *and* I got my knife back. What a dumbass! I knew he'd come back, so I played like I was still out."

"That's exactly what he called you, a dumbass."

"Takes one to know one," Mike said, loosening Jim-Bob's belt from Karen's elbows and freeing her arms. They tip-toed down the hallway to the loading dock, Karen bringing Mike up to date in a hushed voice.

"He said something about taking us to a place called Skytop for experimentation. Mike, something is seriously whacked with all this. We're breaking into a crematorium, held captive by a ghoul who was once the big man on our high-school campus, and now..."

Karen's hand jumped to her mouth when she saw Jim-Bob's body lying in the side yard.

"Mike! What will the neighbors think?"

"Screw the neighbors. I had to find you first."

"We can't just leave Jim's body lying in the side yard!. For one thing he's not dead. The bone tip severs the ghoul's control of a body, but it doesn't kill him. It's like he's paralyzed."

"I'm open to suggestions. Got any?"

Karen considered the situation for a brief moment.

"I saw a box with a white fur in it. I think it's a gift for Jo's mom from Ted Whitson. We'll put the fur over Jim's body to force this awful ghoul out. I'll go in and get it."

Karen returned momentarily with the white fur coat. They pushed Jim's arms through the sleeves and bundled him tightly. A faint sulfurous smell rose from the body, causing Mike to scrunch his face and pinch his nose.

"It's the fox fur speeding up the breakdown of the

Nephilim's bindings with Jim's body," Karen said. "The body was already dead, and now it'll start coming apart really fast."

"Let's get this old slodge inside, and dump it in the parlor. Whitson can deal with it in the morning."

Mike and Karen pulled on Jim's arms, hoping to drag him into the building, but the arms suddenly released and tore loose from their sockets, propelling the teens backwards. The corpse's arms stuck out from the cuffs to the elbows.

"Jim's falling apart," Mike yelled.

"Quiet. Moving him is a problem, now. I probably should've waited until we had him inside to put the fox skin on, but I thought it might help disguise what we're doing. We'll carry him in at the waist."

As they stooped to lift the corpse, a glowing ball of blue light rose from Jim's chest, hovered briefly, and then shot off into the sky.

"What was that?"

"It must have been Jim-Bob's energy form. You can bet he'll be back quick, in some other object or body. We need to hurry up."

Mike and Karen lugged Jim's mangled body into the parlor and laid his torso across the leather couch. Mike lifted Jim's splayed legs to the cushions, before placing the elongated arms between his knees.

"He looks swell, real peaceful," Mike said. "Give me that card and red bow."

Karen handed both to Mike and he fit them in Jim's hands. He removed the gemstone ring from Jim's finger and put it in his pocket.

"Nothing to do but take the ring," Mike cracked. "I wonder what Mrs. Munro will think when Whitson gives her this gift."

"Mike, stop! It is Jim's body, after all. Show some respect."

"And he ain't lookin' so good. I'll say some words. I don't know any Latin or church hymns, but I know 'Solomon Grundy': Solomon Grundy, Born on Monday..."

"Mike, that's sacrilege," Karen laughed.

"At least it's something," Mike answered with a crooked grin, and he continued. "Died on Saturday, Buried on Sunday, This is the end of Solomon Grundy. Okay, let's get out of here."

Remembering the ledger on Whitson's desk, Karen pointed out the deposit slips. "Should we take those?"

"Why not?" Mike agreed, and he began pulling open the desk drawers, quickly examining files and folders. "This might be useful evidence," he said, rifling through several large legal envelopes, stuffed with hundreds of photos of bound and defenseless teens. He handed the envelopes and ledgers to Karen for the ride home, and she bound the stack with Jim-Bob's belt. "Let's get going."

Outside, Mike inspected his vomit-covered shirt and jeans.

"I said I was sorry when you were knocked-out," Karen apologized.

"It's not your fault. I convinced you to come here. Did any of it get on you?"

"Just a spot or two, but it mostly hit the wall and you. I'm so embarrassed."

Mike pulled his shirt off, over his head, and then his jeans. Karen admired his wiry muscular frame, and she was a little shocked that she felt stirred as she watched him rinse his face and neck, and wring out his clothes at the outside faucet.

"You're so casual undressing. I could never bare myself the way you just did; not in front of others."

"Nothing to it. We're friends, right? What's wrong with baring yourself in front of friends? The wind will dry me out and I'll shower when I get home. At least we have the cover story of my being sick, for why we're late."

Saying good night at her door, Karen thought Mike looked very noble, but after a night of mayhem, a kiss was out of the question, and he didn't attempt one. She returned the stack of evidence to him.

Undressing in her room, Karen thought about Mike riding his motorbike home in his wet clothes. She turned out her light and lay down, only now she was thinking about Peter. She tossed and turned for an hour in her bed, but it wasn't thoughts of unnatural beings keeping her awake. It was silly romantic thoughts running around in her head, of

The Summer Set

long summer days and nights, and getting to know two guys she really liked.

14

THE FLYING LESSON

PETER SPENT THE MORNING AFTER his date with Jo working on a pocket radio kit, daydreaming about her and resisting a strong urge to call and hear her voice. Pounding downstairs at noon to rummage through the refrigerator, he found his father in a serious discussion with Commissioner Scott. Peter sat out of sight in the kitchen, eavesdropping while he ate leftovers for lunch.

"The league's in real trouble, Pete," Mr. Scott informed Mr. Miller. "This Blackthorne fellow is plain no-good, and he's blinded the other board members with false promises. They're brainwashed. Everything he says, they parrot. Everything he says do, they do it. Even my oldest and most trusted friends are siding with him. He intends to steal the league right out from under our noses."

"Letting their lawyers draw up the papers to incorporate the league was a mistake," Mr. Miller sighed. "They made you chairman, but the way it's worded, chairman is a ceremonial post, with little power. They took away your rights as founder of the league. I've found some weaknesses

that we can construe as a breach of contract, and create a new incorporation for the Bantam League, but we'll have to wipe out every current director, including yourself, to get rid of Blackthorne and the men around him."

"I'm not running from this fight, Pete. I want them gone, even if I go out with them. I only insist on two things: the league stays headquartered in Williamsport, and only unpaid volunteers can direct the league. Anyone involved needs to be doing it for the love of the game, and not for power and influence. Get me those and I'll bow out."

"Clancy, this situation will get nastier. They have two high-powered California law firms on their side, and all you have in me is one skinny Pennsylvania lawyer. They've already smeared your reputation with that article accusing you of pocketing league funds. That was just a warning shot. There's more to come. If you think you can hang in there, I'll do my best."

"Get started and I'll call you next week," Mr. Scott said, picking up his hat to leave. He called to Peter in the kitchen: "Bye, Chum, see you when I see you."

"Not if I see you first," Peter answered.

Commissioner Scott laughed in appreciation at their running joke, and Mr. Miller closed the door after him, joining Peter at the kitchen table.

"I suppose you heard most of that."

"I didn't understand all of it. How did those men come to have anything to do with the league?"

"The Bantam League makes a lot of money, and has a lot of power and influence through advertising and marketing. Everybody wants a piece of it now, including these new sharks. It's amazing how something as big as the Bantam League could begin with Clancy tripping over a rose bush."

"What do you mean?"

"That's what Clancy told me. Twenty years ago, he was playing catch in his backyard with his nephews, listening to a baseball game on the radio. He ran after a bad throw and tripped over a rose bush. He sat down to rub his shin, and the vision of Bantam League Baseball came to him in that moment. He saw the league, complete and perfect. A league for every boy in America to play in, just like the big leagues. Mr. Scott and his two nephews started out with four teams in Williamsport and now, twenty years later, a half-million young men are playing all across the country. Your Lundsford Lumber team was one of the four original teams."

"Wow. It's pretty cool that Mr. Scott started the league right here in Williamsport, but how can these men just appear one day and take the league over?"

"That's how the law works at times. It's not always fair or even right, and usually the only thing that matters is what's written on paper. Sometimes I think Satan himself writes corporate law. You know, God gives us free will, and whatever we consent to becomes binding on us. A signed agreement can become a deadly trap."

"I wish there was some way I could help him keep it."

"You can help by expressing your opinion when you're asked, but I don't want you getting mixed up in this fight. Don't repeat anything you might've heard us talking about. Legal conversations are confidential. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Peter returned to his room to continue work on the radio kit. Hearing the phone ring downstairs, and thinking the call might be from Jo, he raced down to answer.

"I've got it," he yelled, picking up the receiver. "Miller residence."

A peculiar tone on the other end clicked and buzzed.

"Is Peter Miller there?" a metallic voice asked. "The Blackthorne Youth would like to speak with him."

An uneasy chill spread through Peter. He said nothing as he pressed down on the answering hook, slowly and gently. He hung the phone back in its cradle. Mrs. Miller stood at her stove, watching Peter's careful operation.

"Who was on the phone?"

"Must've been a wrong number."

"Peter, are you involved in something we don't know about?"

"Not anything I know of, why?"

"Two men came knocking at our door yesterday, asking if we had a son who played baseball. Your father and I were discussing the men yesterday evening, before you left on your date. Do you know anything about a group called the

Blackthorne Youth?"

"I've heard of it. Some of the guys at school and in the league are joining, but what did the men look like? What kind of questions were they asking?"

"We thought they were from the Bantam League office. They opened a jewel case of gold rings with red stones, and said they wanted you to have one, for joining this Blackthorne Youth. They carried clipboards and wanted to know how much you slept at night, when you went to bed, how much time you spent alone, how much television you watched and when you practiced. When they started on a second page of questions, your dad ended the interview, and asked them to leave."

"I hope you didn't give them too much information about me."

When Peter finally called Jo in the afternoon, he couldn't get through. The phone's outside service died that day, and was spotty throughout the following weeks.

"We've had the phone company out, Chum," Mr. Miller explained. "The linemen say it's moisture in the phone box. I watched them clean the terminals. It seems like the only calls I hear clearly are from this Blackthorne Youth group, wanting to speak to you."

Peter felt a tingle race up his spine, and he began to wonder if the Nephilim were causing the electrical interference. It was a good possibility. Maddie had said they were electrical in nature, and Peter noticed Nephilim

lurking all around town. They all dressed in the same style, dark suits and fedora hats that concealed their faces in shadows. Peter also noticed black sedans driving slowly by his house every evening. The cars followed him closely on his noon walks to baseball practice, but he didn't inform his parents. He didn't want them worrying about him and restricting his freedom. To avoid the cars he began hiking to practice through the open meadows, woods and alleys behind his neighborhood.

Chief DeSorcier's promised Blackthorne Youth campaign against comics and dime-store novels was spreading through Peter's neighborhood, aided by articles in the local papers condemning 'trashy' books. The Blackthorne Youth received parade permits to march through the streets on Wednesday nights, carrying lit torches and picking up boxes of paperbacks and comics set out at the curb. The columns sang patriotic songs, and families sat on their lawns in the evenings listening to the jaunty tunes becoming louder as the marchers paraded up their streets. Doctors, police, city councilmen and ministers joined the crusade and carried the boxes and piles to Brandon Park. Deck Gaines collected the most comics and won the right to light the blaze. Crowds gathered to cheer the lighting of the bonfire. Mr. Whitson officiated in his role as the Blackthorne Youth deacon.

"The Lord loves the smell of burning books," Mr. Whitson proclaimed. "Look at the beautiful colored

flames!"

Janice, concerned for Peter's immortal soul, collected his comics as an offering, and a horrified Peter barely rescued his collection from the curb. The marches grew longer and soon droves of teens were trooping down every street in Williamsport.

"It's concerning," Mr. Miller said to Peter one evening as the parade passed their doorstep. "Something wicked and unwholesome is taking hold of Williamsport. There's a mob mentality infecting our public conversations. So many people have lost their ability to think critically, if they ever had it. Preying on people's fears of youth corruption is an effort to drum up membership for this Blackthorne Youth group."

"If you're worried, then I'm even more worried," Peter replied. "I thought book burnings were a thing of the past." "Chum, you're witnessing firsthand how easily people will give up their fundamental God-given rights for a tiny smidge of social acceptance. To think that a single decade after the second World War, American citizens are burning books," Mr. Miller sighed. "People should try reading and discussing books, not burning them. Always think for yourself, son. Don't compromise your ideals for the sake of fitting in."

To rest his mind from these troubling developments, Peter took to dropping by Jo's house almost daily, in the late afternoons of June, after baseball practice. He found her

company calming and comfortable. She was easy to talk to, and he began to absently fantasize about being stranded alone with her on a tropical island, with no troubles, a medium-sized island with pleasant trade winds, horses to ride, and plentiful fruit trees. Jo and he made the rounds of the gardens on the college campus, or met at Tony's for pizza and talked about everything under the sun and moon. One afternoon at Tony's, Peter mentioned the new necklace Jo was wearing, one exactly like Maddie's.

"That's a pretty necklace. I think I've seen it before."

"No way. My mom just gave it to me. She found it wrapped in her closet, with a gift tag, from my father. Sometimes, when I'm wearing it, I think I can almost hear his voice. I'm sure it's only my memories of him, but it seems real enough."

"It's nice that you have good memories. It looks like a real ruby."

"It must be artificial. It's blood red, and so large it would cost thousands if it was real. My father wouldn't have spent a fortune on a necklace for me, but even if it's costume jewelry it's lovely."

Peter sensed that Jo was putting a lid on any further examination of the stone, and yet he also felt that eventually he'd need to bring the subject up again. Peter was certain the Blackthorne Youth's jeweled rings were a part of the foolishness and mischief taking over people's minds and behavior. How many rings existed? Maddie had said her

necklace stone was the largest stone in a set. Where was her necklace? Was it the one Jo was wearing?

Deep in thought, Peter pulled a thick slice of pepperoni pizza free from the pie they were sharing. The stringy cheese stretched from the pan to his plate, and he gathered it loosely with his fingers to his lips. Jo made a noise to get his attention.

"Peter, you're not listening to me."

Surprised, Peter glanced up to find Jo staring at him, a soda straw in each nostril. Choking on unprepared laughter, Dr. Pepper exploded through his nose. Jo clapped her hands in joy.

"You're so...so... *bizarre!*" Peter exclaimed, and suddenly Jo sneezed. The straws flew out, striking Peter's forehead. He pig-snorted in astonishment.

Jo collapsed into a fresh fit of glee, swaying and rocking in her seat, breathless, a victim of her own absurdity, an out-sized blob of spit bubbling on her lips.

Unable to stop laughing, Peter cupped his mouth, and dipped his head below the table top, where Jo's red-cheeked face soon appeared. More laughter. They buried their faces in the vinyl seats for a long minute, before slowly rising to face each other.

The straws were back in Jo's nostrils.

"Please stop," Peter snuffled, his eyes burning and watering.

"Lord! Lord!" Jo cried, gasping for air, biting her index

finger. "I'm about to pee my pants."

The contagion of hysterics neared one last eruption, but at the sight of Tony staring unhappily at the counter, Jo began wiping up the mess with gobs of napkins, coughing and swallowing her last fading giggles, deliberately keeping her eyes from meeting Peter's.

In the following days they only had to glance at each other with an off-kilter peep, to fuel fresh gales of laughter and at night in his room, Peter would break out in a huge grin, shaking his head, at the memory of Jo's antics.

Forming and painting Egyptian masks for Mike's magic show began to occupy large blocks of Jo's free time, and they went out on the town less and less. Peter assisted her where and how he was able, painting coats of lacquer and tearing newspaper for papier-mâché, but he left the finer details to Jo's skilled hands. Secretly, he was jealous of Jo's devotion to Mike's plans. Mike often called while they were working on the masks, but the calls would end quickly whenever Jo mentioned that Peter was with her. How long were the calls when Peter wasn't there?

Early one evening, delayed after baseball practice, Peter dropped by Jo's house unexpectedly, and discovered her out in the street at twilight, laughing under the streetlamp with Mike. Peter's hand tightened and coiled around his bat, as jealousy gripped his heart. Containing himself, Peter turned out of sight, taking the long way home, brooding on the memory. Within thirty minutes, he'd punched a hole in the

wall plaster of his room, and found himself drearily soaking his re-injured hand for the next three days.

A week later, Peter sat on Jo's bed watching her delicately define a mask with the dark eyes of a Nile queen. Jo's sundress exposed her glowing skin to his growing passion for her. He was just about to reach out and touch her bare arm when the phone rang. It was Mike.

"Peter's here with me, Mike," Jo said. "I'll talk to you later."

"What did he want?"

"He just called to say hello," Jo answered reassuringly. "He's been pestering me to see my plane. I thought I would take him to the airfield tomorrow, but only if you don't mind. Would you mind?"

"No. Should I?"

"No. It's nothing very exciting. It's a small airfield."

"Small or not, Mike has a way of finding trouble."

"I promise we'll stay out of trouble," Jo said cheerfully, putting aside the mask she was painting. Uncrossing her legs she leaned over to peck Peter's lips. "I like being with you, Peter. Please don't be jealous. Mike and I go back a long way. You have to trust I would never hurt you."

"I don't feel like I have any say," Peter said. "I guess it's all right."

"Thank you for understanding," Jo said, hugging Peter and cradling his head against her shoulder, before returning to her painting, leaving Peter alone with his morbid

imagination.

Lying in his bed that night, thoughts of deception and betrayal ran wild as zebras, darting, crossing and zig-zagging across the savanna of Peter's imagination. He wondered how often Mike called Jo, for how long, and to what end. Peter recalled the rumors at the high school of guys visiting Jo in her room. It didn't occur to him that he was a guy, and for weeks all they'd been doing was painting masks and talking. Darkest of all his endless suspicions was that Mike was visiting Jo at night, in her apartment. Tortured by his suspicions he finally dropped to sleep, exhausted, at four-thirty in the morning.

While Peter was sleeping through the forenoon of a brilliant Saturday, Mike and Jo were inspecting her Cessna in its hangar.

"My dad bought it for me when I was twelve," Jo said. "We flew together every Saturday that last year, before he went to Korea."

"Where is everybody?" Mike asked.

"This is how it usually is. It's a small airstrip, and we take care of things ourselves."

"I thought there'd be lots of people and rules."

"There are rules, and at big airports you'd see lots of people, but not here. Let's get it out into the fresh air."

Mike and Jo pushed her plane from the hangar. Jo opened the cockpit door to point out the panel instrumentation. The ruby necklace around her neck plunged forward from her

yellow sleeveless blouse, bringing it to Mike's attention.

"Where'd you get that necklace? It looks like one I've seen before."

"That's strange. Peter said the same thing. It's something my dad meant to give me a long time ago."

Unconvinced, Mike surreptitiously examined the necklace, as Jo explained the ins-and-outs of the cockpit. The stone looked identical to Maddie's, the same one Blackthorne had taken from him. What was it doing around Jo's neck? Mike knew that lifting it from Jo would be harder than taking it from Blackthorne himself.

"Mike, are you looking down my blouse?" Jo scolded, and Mike's eyes darted to hers. He liked looking in her eyes, but not when she was angry. Then they were terrible.

"No, I wasn't, but can I ask you something else personal?"

"Only if you're not trying to woo me."

"I'll try that another time, but right now lift your sunglasses for me," Mike said, and when she complied he looked deeply into every aspect of her gray left eye. "It looks like a comet-shaped bit of your iris is missing, with blood at the edges. Did you injure it?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Mike," Jo said sarcastically, restoring her Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses to the bridge of her nose. "Not that it's any of your business, but I was born this way. It's called a uveal coloboma. It's a Greek word that means 'defect' and it's a hole in my iris. I don't have much

pigment in that eye, so it looks gray, and sometimes I don't see well in bright light, and that's why I like to wear sunglasses. I'm defective, okay? Satisfied?"

"Absolutely," Mike smiled. "Don't be sore. You know you're perfect to me."

Jo huffed like a perturbed filly, but smiled in spite of herself. She could never stay mad at Mike long.

"Can we get back to your lesson? It's important in case I need your help. The instruments are arranged in a 'T'. The attitude indicator is in the top center, airspeed to the left, altimeter to the right. The heading is under the attitude. Turn and bank and vertical speed are under the airspeed and altimeter."

"So attitude is the most important because it's top and center?"

"The attitude tells you if you're flying level, and if the nose of the plane is above or below the horizon, but all the instruments are important."

Lifting her sunglasses into her hair, Jo held out her hand.

"Come aboard and I'll take you for a ride around the airstrip."

Jo taxied the plane slowly down the strip, but at the end of the runway she made a wide turn in the opposite direction. Mike felt the Cessna shudder as the ground blurred beneath the plane's wings.

"I think we're picking up speed," Mike said with concern.

"Oops, too fast," Jo grinned. "We're leaving the ground."

Mike's heart fluttered and his mouth went dry as the plane lifted into the air.

"You don't have a real pilot's license, Jo. You'll get in big trouble."

"Just because I don't have my *official* pilot's license, doesn't mean I don't know how to fly. We're only in trouble if we get caught or crash. What you really want is to get up in the air, isn't it?"

"No."

"Don't be a scaredy-cat," Jo laughed. "Let's climb higher and I'll show you the town."

The abrupt lifting of the plane caused Mike's stomach to sink, but he settled his nerves by following the Cessna's shadow as it swept across the ripening farmland below. After climbing a few more minutes, Jo banked her plane and the Susquehanna River came into view. The ball fields sparkled like tiny green diamonds, as toy cars crossed the Market Street Bridge. Mike picked out his house, Jo's house, Peter's house, Karen's house and then his eyes caught sight of a huge Freightliner truck pulling into the Whitson funeral home parking lot.

"Jo, circle here and drop down. I want to see what they're up to at Whitson's Funeral Home."

"I'll go down to five hundred feet and you'll be able to see things pretty clearly."

Mike kept his sight pinned to the activity surrounding the Freightliner.

"That's strange. About a dozen Blackthorne Youth piled out of the trailer, and then formed into lines forcing some other teens out, and into the rear entrance of the mortuary," Mike observed. "Do another pass."

"Maybe they're new recruits. That creep Whitson keeps bothering me to join. He's something or the other high up in the Blackthorne Youth. Maybe he's using his office to swear them in."

"And maybe they're being herded inside against their will."

"What's gotten into you and Peter, with your paranoid plots? Honestly, I think you're both flipping your lids."

"Well, while you were locked up in your room, we were dealing with Williamsport becoming an Antsville of evil. If I told you half of what's up, you'd flip your lid, too. I'm sure you've heard one or the other of us mention the mess with the Bantam League and the Nephilim, but you're on a strict need-to-know basis. There's nothing you need to know right now."

"Fine. Be mysterious, See if I care," Jo frowned. "I don't want to keep flying over this old mortuary anyway. I'd rather see the hills and countryside at Skytop."

"Skytop? See, I've heard of that place. There's supposedly some kind of research facility there that allows travel through dimensions."

"Traveling through dimensions? What are you talking about?"

"Now you need to know, because you're flying me to Skytop. I've had more than a few face-to-face encounters with these Nephilim, and they're not nice and they're not from this world. Your imagination is about to be put to the test."

"Okay, but if we find this thing and I'm not impressed you owe me a double-chocolate malt. I'll look at the scenery, you search for this monstrosity, and we'll both be happy."

Mike kept any further thoughts on the Nephilim to himself. Jo didn't normally appreciate mysteries, where he, being a natural detective, doggedly chased them. The steady drone of the Cessna's engine worked into Mike's tight muscles, gradually freeing him to enjoy the flight. He followed the apparent movement of the landscape outside his window, studying the patchwork of sunlight and shadow floating over the green treetops. His curious eyes tailed a hawk sweeping above the landscape, and a coal train chugging lazily through the mountains. Near where the train entered a gap he spotted a burnished metal arch, set among low white buildings in a large clearing of land. The red-and-gold phoenix, symbol for Blackthorne- Triangle Capital, crowned the roofs of the buildings.

"There's a weird shimmer in the middle of that silver-colored arch, between those buildings. Can you go lower?"

"I don't want to skim the treetops, but I'll drop to five hundred feet again."

Barbed wire topped a high fence enclosing the area, and

at a lower altitude, Mike saw arcs of electricity jumping across a pale red membrane glowing within the arch.

"Fly in closer," Mike insisted. "I've never seen anything like it."

Jo dropped another hundred feet, allowing Mike to observe small globes of blue light, about a half-foot in diameter, passing in and out of the membrane, appearing and disappearing as they passed through. The scintillating lights crackled and grew brighter as they swept through the arch. The swarming activity around the ring of buildings resembled a beehive.

"I think those balls of light are Nephilim when they're not in a body. I've seen one for myself, leaving a human body," Mike said, purposely omitting that it was Jim Calendar's corpse.

"Well, your Nephilim seem like they're protecting the arch," Jo observed, pointing across Mike's nose. "That one in particular is at our same altitude and on a collision course, I think."

"You think?" Mike shouted in alarm. "Get us the heck outta here."

"It seems to be tracking us. I'll dive lower."

Several tense seconds passed in the Cessna's cabin, as Jo dove evasively.

"I think the stupid arch is pulling us in. My instruments are going haywire. If I fight the pull I might slam into the arch."

"We're heading down!" Mike yelled, ducking his head. "Please don't crash."

"Potty training is the first lesson in flying, Mike. Hold on to your pants, because I'm aiming us straight through."

"Heavens to Murgatroyd!"

"Trust me, planes fly through electrical storms all the time. I'm pretty sure we'll be fine, if we don't fly into another dimension."

Mike's whitening knuckles tightened on his seat. Swarms of blue lights buzzed angrily around the plane as it sliced through the membrane in the arch. Crackling electricity blanketed the Cessna's cabin so brightly that Mike turned his sight away reflexively, long enough to catch the focused determination in Jo's face. Within seconds, they burst free on the other side of the arch, but their passage had disrupted the wavering sheet of energy. Veins of electricity convulsed through the delicate film, shaking the arch so strongly that it bent and crumpled. A dull rumble chased the Cessna's tail as bolts of dancing fire hurled eerily into the sky. Jo's swift bank home restored Mike's breathing.

"My instruments are working again. You looked worried. Didn't you have confidence in me?"

"Not until I saw your face as we went through. Then I knew we'd make it. Before that I thought we were dead for sure."

"Mike, I'm certain I heard my father's voice, back there," Jo admitted, and then she fell silent for a moment. "Does

hearing his voice mean I'm going whacko? Like after he died? It was him, I'm certain of it. He used my full name, Jolene, like he always did when he was being serious with me. 'Jolene, go straight through.' That's what he said to me, just now . It was him."

"You're fine. You're not going whacko, but sometimes I think I am. I'm about done with fun for the day."

"So that's it?" Jo smirked. "I gave you exactly what you asked for, and now you're being a germ."

"Return me to earth. I won't ask again."

Fifteen minutes later, Jo radioed the open air to make sure no other pilots were on approach. None answered and she circled the landing strip, losing altitude, before setting the Cessna down with graceful ease. Pushing the plane into its hangar, they heard a distant boom from Skytop's direction, an instant before a sharp jolt and rolling wave trembled the ground beneath their feet. They hustled Jo's plane back into hiding, and hopped on Mike's motorbike for the return trip to town. Nestled behind Mike, racing into the buffeting air, Jo hooked her fingers into his belt loops, shouting above the wind, into his right ear.

"After we all went bowling, I was looking forward to hanging out with you and Peter and Karen, all summer, but we haven't done anything together in weeks. Is our summer set breaking up?"

"Nah, I think we're okay. Chum and I have been on the outs a little. Chum's mom invited me for their picnic on the

Fourth."

"Will you put in a good word for me? I don't think she approves of me dating Peter. She likes you. A word from you will get me in."

Mike dropped Jo off at her curb, where she lightly kissed his cheek.

"Thanks for taking me up in your plane," Mike said. "That was something else."

"My treat," Jo laughed. "Sorry I nearly killed you today."

"If I'm going to die with somebody, I'd want it to be you. See you on the Fourth."

Jo sauntered up her drive, and found Whitson, leaning against his black DeSoto and smoking a cigarette, waiting for her by the side door.

"Sight-seeing with your boyfriend?" Whitson asked, his lips curling in a mock smile. "I saw your plane buzzing over the funeral home. Were you looking for something?"

"I don't see it's any of your business," Jo answered, as she attempted to slide past him. He blocked her way with his arm, his palm flat against the side of her house.

"I think it's the FAA's business, isn't it?"

Jo froze. The freak knew the FAA would take away her student license for flying without an instructor. She turned to face him.

"I'll tell my mother about you going through my things," she flashed. "She'll have you arrested as a pervert."

"Just the trash, Jo, not your things. Collecting the trash,"

he said calmly, putting on a greasy smile. "Really, we don't want to involve your mother in this. She's always bragging on you. It'd really upset her to learn what a reckless pilot you are. I took a few photos to prove it, but I think you and I can keep a secret, can't we? You're the last person I'd want to hurt."

"I still think she'd be interested to know that you're always creeping on me," Jo's eyes burned into Whitson's, but his smile only grew.

"Trying to keep you safe, Jo. You've shown poor judgment lately. Your mother agrees with me. We want to keep you out of trouble."

"What a laugh, all you want to do is make trouble."

"Your disrespect wounds me deeply, but I know you don't mean it. What teens really want when they're being disrespectful is discipline, discipline and love. We need to channel your energy in a constructive direction, and I have the perfect idea. We're starting a Girl's Auxiliary for the Blackthorne Youth. We want you to head it up, recruit the younger girls, and act as a role model of good conduct and right living. You might even be invited to join the Order of the Eastern Star."

"Thank you, but I don't think so. I'm busy this summer," Jo clipped, swiftly ducking under his arm.

"We're having a grand Blackthorne Youth rally on the Fourth of July," Whitson called after her. "I hope we can keep your little flight today a secret, or bye-bye pilot

license, bye-bye summer freedom. I'm sure you'll make the right choice. Call me before the Fourth, so I can tell your mother you've agreed. She'll be so excited."

Jo slammed the door in his face.

15

FOURTH OF JULY

“YOU LOOKED LOVELY ON THE parade float today, Jo,” Mrs. Miller said. “Your uniform was very crisp and inspiring. I’m sure your mother is very proud of you. It’s quite impressive that you’re willing to take on a leadership position.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Miller,” Jo smiled. She and Karen were helping Mrs. Miller prepare the salads for their picnic, on the levee above the Susquehanna River’s west branch. “I didn’t want to join the Blackthorne Youth at first, but I really enjoy it now. The younger girls are so excited to join.”

“Well, no harm can come from girls staying busy,” Mrs. Miller said. “Karen and you have been a big help, and just look at all the food on our table!”

“We’ve started the dogs and burgers, Susan,” Mr. Miller called out. “How are the side dishes coming?”

“We’re waiting on you, aren’t we, girls?” “The table’s all set,” Jo and Karen agreed.

Waiting for the meats to cook, they took turns sword fighting Mike with sparklers. Near the river bank, Peter

propped a soda bottle against a large rock, using it as a launch pad for screaming bottle-rockets, that popped halfway across the water. Other parties up and down both sides of the river responded with their own cannonades of bottle-rockets and roman candles.

Fireflies appeared, roving slowly over the banks, blinking on and off in fluorescent green. Jo, Karen and Janice chased them with a clean mayonnaise jar.

"I think we should catch at least twenty," Jo said, poking holes in the lid with an ice pick. "The glowing jar will make a wonderful centerpiece."

The fireflies were captured before the meats were finished cooking. Jo ate a burger and two hot dogs at dinner, along with large helpings from every side dish passing her plate.

"It's a lovely evening," Mrs. Miller commented. "It's been so warm the past two weeks. They say it was probably heat lightning that caused the gas explosion at Skytop. Anyway, I'm glad the storms held off for tonight."

"So am I," Karen agreed. "My dad is driving home from Cleveland with my grandfather. It's been three years since I've seen him."

"Chum tells me your grandfather flew all the way to Cleveland from Alaska in the jump seat of a cargo plane," Mr. Miller said. "That's a long, hard ride."

"Twenty-six hours, with stops, but he doesn't mind. He likes to fly."

In the deepening blue nightfall, the men set out more displays of ground fireworks, and 'oohs' and 'aahs' filled the air with each loud burst of color and light. The brilliant sparks showered and flowered over the reflecting river. The Blackthorne Youth Torchlight Parade passed over the bridge at eight forty-five; at nine o'clock the town fireworks display began, with experts on the bridge directing the pyrotechnics.

"We almost didn't have a fireworks display this year after the town hall fire," Mr. Miller said. "Clancy Scott is paying for this one out of his own pocket. He has a lot of faith that the festival you four are planning will cover his cost."

"Look over there," Karen pointed towards the bridge. "Those blue lights are changing direction."

"What kind are those?" Janice asked.

"Those are Stars," Mike answered. "They're called Bombettes when they explode at the finish, and those going off right now are Comets. They have bright tails and trail fire."

"The Stars are still going!" Janice said with delight. "That isn't normal. Maybe I'm wrong," Mike said

pensively, studying the dancing lights. "Jo, don't those stars look a lot like the balls of light we saw last week?"

"It's hard to tell from so far away," Jo answered, raising herself on her tippy-toes to look over Mike. She placed her hands on his arms, and her chin on his shoulder to hold herself steady. "But, yes, they do look similar."

Peter's stomach fluttered and his shoulders tightened at the casual intimacy between Mike and Jo. He came up behind Jo, molding his hands to her waist. Jo tipped her head back and smiled. She released Mike's shoulders and leaned loosely into Peter, encouraging him to circle his arms around her. Spellbound, their fascinated gaze tracked the unidentified lights. The blue orbs flew in formation through clouds of smoke and trails of spent shells, sweeping under the bridge before swiftly climbing into the sky and dropping just as rapidly.

Peter was certain the bright rockets would smash into the bridge, but no more than fifteen feet above its guardrails, a brilliant white flash instantly consumed every whipsawing light. The flash set off the remaining fireworks, which exploded off the bridge to all points of the compass. Strangled screams and amazed shouts escaped the spectators, as the last of the exhausted bursts fizzled into the river. The premature finale was bizarre and spectacular, and the entire show was over in less than two minutes.

"Maybe they were Bombettes," Mike said aloud.

The others turned their wide disbelieving eyes on him. The celebration was over, and Mrs. Miller and Karen began packing up the baskets and boxes. Peter and Jo walked a short distance down the embankment, away from the party. They sat down in the grass on the edge of the levee, looking out over the river. Jo's necklace glowed ever so slightly in the almost moonless night. Peter searched for some small

flat stones to skip on the water, and Jo stretched out her legs on the cool grass to watch him fling them. His record was five skips.

"You sure ate a lot," Peter said. "Are you feeling better?"

"The parade lifted my mood," Jo laughed, flipping her hair. "Maybe joining the Blackthorne Youth is good for me after all."

"You're not really a joiner," Peter said. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I didn't have much choice, Peter. I was under a lot of pressure to join, but it's not so bad. All I have to do is go to weekly meetings, and sit at a sign-up table every so often to recruit new members."

Peter sat silent, feeling his jealousy rising up inside. The memory of Jo holding Mike's arms and putting her chin on his shoulder filled him with poisonous venom. Suddenly he retched out the stored hurt of his troubled heart onto Jo.

"Does Mike ever come to see you at night?"

Jo picked at the cool blades of grass, as if she did not hear him, and it stung Peter. A minute of stillness passed between them. Unable to deal with her silence, he prodded her again.

"So everything with Mike is totally innocent?"

"I heard your question, Peter. I'm not worried about Mike. I'm worried about us."

"I'm sorry, I say stupid things."

"When have I ever lied to you? I'm steady with you, and

anyway, is that what you want? Do you want to come over at night and see me?"

"I think about it sometimes," Peter confessed. "I'd like to see you tonight."

"What will happen if we're found out? It's so risky. I don't want to be foolish, do you?"

"Maybe, maybe I do."

"Okay," Jo agreed quietly. "I'll be up, but don't come by too late."

Jo's simple words were the fulfillment of a dream, too full of promise to be measured or understood. It was as if a calming fresh breeze had blown through Peter's fevered imagination and cooled him instantly. His fingers lightly grazed Jo's, and then he touched her bare arms, stroking them with his palms as Jo leaned into his shoulder and sighed, turning her lips to his, hoping he would close the remaining distance, but suddenly a beam of light illuminated them and they pulled back in surprise. Mike had used the Bel Air's spotlight to find them.

"We see you," he shouted. "Let's get going. It's getting impossibly dark."

Peter and Jo walked hand-in-hand back to the car, squeezing into the rear seat beside Mike and Karen. When the Bel Air took curves, the teens leaned in hard trying to crush each other, exchanging exaggerated, playful apologies.

"I'm sorry, I can't help it. The car is making me do it.

Excuse me. I beg your pardon."

"You guys are silly," Janice remarked from the front seat.

Karen's family car was home, and that meant her grandfather was inside waiting for her. She said a hurried thank you and ran inside. Peter wanted to meet Ataninnuaq, but it was late, and he told himself he would go by the next day. At Jo's house, Peter got out, held the door open for her, and walked her to the porch. Jo's hand pressed his tenderly.

"See you later," she said, unlocking her door and vanishing inside. Mike was the last guest dropped off.

"See you at practice tomorrow, Chum," he said. "Only one more week until the State Championship. Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Miller. Night, Janice."

When they arrived home, the Millers unpacked and moved heavily upstairs to bed. Peter sat alone at the dining table, feeling uneasy and restless as he planned the details of visiting Jo. He dusted leftover strawberries with powdered sugar, eating them one bite at a time. The phone rang, and Peter answered it. Static obscured the voice on the other end of the line, and a graveled voice asked to speak to 'the Peter Miller who plays baseball'. Peter quickly hung up the phone, and returned to the dining table. Shortly, the phone rang again. Rising from the table, Peter placed his hand over the mouthpiece, moving the phone slowly to his ear, trying to listen for clues to the caller's identity.

"Peter Miller, I know it's you," the same graveled voice said. "I travel from Alaska to avoid long distance fees, and

you hang up."

Peter let out a heavy held breath and laughed.

"Hi Ataninnuaq, you got me on that one. Sorry I hung up on you, but I've had lots of strange calls the past few weeks. It's kind of hard to hear you. The line is fuzzy."

"Do the calls ask to speak to 'Peter Miller who plays baseball'?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Because you told my granddaughter, and she told me," Ataninnuaq laughed. "Why didn't you come in to see me for a moment when you dropped Karen off? I wanted to meet you in person, and I had a gift for you."

"I wanted to come in, but I thought it would be better if I visited tomorrow."

"Tomorrow might be too late. You need the protective tools I have made for you. You have not been going out at night have you?"

"Not usually, I try to get in early."

"Hmm," Ataninnuaq noted skeptically, "it is my opinion you incline towards the darkness. Remember, you must not go out at night until you resolve this matter with the dark spirits."

"Yes, sir."

"Come to see me, and I will give you my gifts. In the meantime, I will keep a vigil on you. Take care and have a good night. I will see you tomorrow."

"Yes, sir, good night."

Peter hung up the phone, and after considering Ataninnuaq's words, he decided against going to Jo's. He attempted three times to call her, but he was unable to get through because of the line interference. He knew she'd be waiting up for him. He came up with a plan he felt would allow him to keep both of his promises.

He went outside to the garage, and collected a step ladder and a length of rope. He set the ladder next to the back porch roof line, and looked up at his bedroom window. Getting out of his bedroom window would be a cinch, he thought. He went inside to his room with the rope, and Oso came in to sleep with him. Opening his duffel bag and taking out his mitt, he inserted his Louisville Slugger bat. He tied the mouth of the bag with the length of rope. Satisfied with his preparations, he lay down in his bunk, still in his clothes. Remembering to set his alarm, he tucked it in beside his pillow, before dropping off to sleep.

The low buzzing of the alarm woke him at one a.m., and he scrambled down from his bunk in the darkness. After raising the window, he lowered his duffel bag to the ground outside, and threw the rope down after it. Holding the window frame, he backed out of the window, stretching his foot and firmly planting it on the porch roof. He briefly held to the gutter to straddle the side of the house, before stepping fully on the roof. Oso's paws were on the windowsill and he whimpered anxiously, looking for a way to follow.

"Shh! You can't go, boy. You stay home. I'll be back."

Oso's concerned whines followed Peter down the ladder, but when he reached the lawn, Oso disappeared from the sill. Peter put on his knee and shin guards and Oso reappeared at the window, impatient to get down. Peter did not want to encourage Oso in any way, so he looked down and ignored him. Putting on his chest protector and mask and picking up his bat, he felt fully armed and protected. The walk to Jo's house was only about ten minutes. Peter told himself he would keep out of sight, and take every precaution to avoid detection.

Peter moved with as much stealth as he could manage in a catcher's outfit, and he traveled off the sidewalk and through the neighboring yards, staying close to trees and bushes in the event a car should drive by. He reached Mulberry Street safely and advanced through the open green of the summer-shuttered college campus, its pebbled paths magnifying his presence, and the hushed air amplifying every footstep. A sliver of moonlight illuminated his movements against the still surroundings.

Three blocks from Jo's house, Peter spotted a shadow slouching against a stone pillar at the far campus gate. The shadow lifted its shoulders, seeming to grow larger, and a thin stream of blue smoke rose in the air around it. When Peter realized the shadow was not moving from its place, he darted behind a large elm, which covered the path with its protective limbs. Looking out from behind its branches,

Peter was considering a retreat home, but the unhurried shadow addressed him in a stubby subterranean voice.

"Don't stop on my account. If you're going somewhere, keep going."

Peter stayed behind the cover of the tree.

"A little late out isn't it?" the shadow asked.

"I'm headed home from a friend's house."

"You're one of those guys who play the sport baseball, aren't you? The one named Peter Miller. We've been looking for you."

Peter noticed a second shadow appearing thirty yards to his right. He swallowed to wet his dry throat as he stepped out from behind the elm with his bat.

"Careful! He's got a bat!" a voice laughed darkly, and another shadow holding a stout object in its hands moved in towards Peter on his left. "Wood on wood. We brought our bats, too. Let's play ball. Anyone got a ball?"

"I forgot my bat and ball," the shadow to Peter's right chuckled. "But I've got an ax handle, and we can use his head for the ball. I bet I smash it out of the park."

Another shadow appeared from behind the wall at the gate. The blue flare of a match flame touched a cigarette, lighting it up. The glowing orange end of the cigarette floated serenely in the darkness, and in the dim light, Peter thought he recognized Blackthorne, smoking from his throat hole. Sharp blue beams cut from his eyes, glittering in the dark. The street light at the gate dimmed, before

fading out completely. Only the crescent moon's thin light survived behind an obscuring cloud.

"The gang's all here," the first shadow cackled. Leaving Blackthorne at the gate, the shadow on Peter's front advanced towards him, as the other two approached from the right and left, encircling Peter.

Retreating to the elm to cover his back, Peter yelled for help, but his call was swallowed up in the thick darkness, a darkness that was more like water than air. The elm's ponderous limbs served to hinder the shadows' attack. The leaves and small branches formed a protective circle around Peter, forcing his assailants to crouch and strike awkwardly, as their carefully orchestrated advance fell apart. Peter took full advantage, belting them with the full force of his baseball bat, keeping them at bay, while gauging their distance.

Initially, the shadows pulled back to a safer distance, waving their wooden clubs tentatively, testing Peter, judging his strength, before pressing forward with determination. Peter gripped his bat with both hands, meeting the first attacker with a crushing blow to his ribs. The shadow went down with a gasp. The other two shadows rushed in and the battle became a desperate exchange of blows with wooden war clubs. Peter's protective gear absorbed a good number of their blows, and he was too mad and excited to feel any of the blows coming through. He switched his bat to his right hand, stabbing and swinging

with its heavy end where and how he could. With his left hand he scraped up some dirt at the base of the tree and flung it into the face of one of the shadows. The shadow spit and snarled.

"You punk, I'll rip your eyes out when I get that mask off you."

Suddenly a beast, a ferocious black ghost, soared into the fray. It was Oso, driving into the shadows with bared teeth. He locked on one shadow's forearm, pulling with all his might. The second shadow left Peter to whale at Oso with his heavy ax handle. This gave Peter an opening to smash him across the back with his bat. The first fallen shadow was now struggling up and rejoining the fight. He grabbed Peter's legs, pulling him into the dirt. Peter kicked the shadow's face. Flailing limbs battled with tooth and claw on the bare ground in a deadly thrash.

Peter lost hold of his bat in the brawl and found himself on his back, kicking up defensively to cover a flurry of blows. He heard Oso yelp in pain and then renew his attack, even as Peter started to become aware of his own exhaustion. Pushing himself, he scrambled to his feet and drove full force into the shadow striking Oso, bringing his opponent down in a tackle, hitting the shadow in the face furiously with his bare fists. A powerful wind rushed through the leaves and a heavy branch broke away, clobbering one of his opponents.

"Another one is here," a shadow cried out in pain. A

second shadow shouted, "There may be more coming, get to the car!"

The shadow squirming beneath Peter slithered from his grasp, escaping with the others into the darkness. Oso gave chase briefly, before returning to Peter's side and lying down. The gate light shone again and its halo was much brighter and larger than before. Peter could easily see in all directions, and something told him to collect his wits, move on, and get to safety. Oso lay on his side, unmoving, except for his panting tongue. Leaving his bat beneath the tree, Peter carried Oso in his arms the remaining distance to Jo's house. Laying Oso down in the periwinkle outside her room, Peter tapped on Jo's window. At first there was no response, and he tapped faster and louder before Jo appeared and cranked open the window.

"Peter, why are you wearing your catcher's mask?"

"It's a long story. My dog is here with me and I think he's hurt. Can you open your door?"

Jo looked down from her window at Oso.

"Bring him around. I'll open the door."

Peter lifted Oso and lugged him into Jo's room. He collapsed in the corner, listening to Oso's troubled breathing.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," Peter said. "Can you turn on your light?"

"We already made enough noise at the door. If my mom gets up, she might see the light and check on me. I'll get a

flashlight."

Jo left and quickly returned, shining the light for Peter while Oso reluctantly allowed his examination, often licking at Peter's face. Oso had no obvious injuries, but his breathing was rapid and shallow. Occasionally he'd lift his head to look for Peter and, seeing him, he'd relax and drop it again.

"So what happened?" Jo asked. "Are you hurt?"

"Some men with clubs mugged me on my way over here. Oso must've followed, and he attacked them to protect me. I'm pretty sore in places, but my equipment absorbed a lot of the blows."

Jo asked the obvious, but unanswered, question.

"Why are you wearing your equipment?"

Peter had no choice but to tell Jo the entire truth - the meeting at the town hall, the fireworks, Udjuk, the Nephilim, Maddie, the phone calls, Ataninnuaq, the warnings. In the telling it occurred to him that every troublesome situation he'd found himself in included some bad decision on his part, and now his dog had paid a huge price for his poor judgment. He smoothed Oso's soft fur with his hand.

"What time is it?" Peter asked.

"Two-thirty."

"I might hurt Oso more if I carry him home, and I shouldn't try it in the dark anyway."

Peter considered the situation before coming up with

another plan.

"Can I stay with you until morning? We'll set the alarm for five-thirty and carry Oso outside. When I get home I'll tell my dad he's missing. I'll know where to find him and when we come looking, he'll answer our calls."

Jo studied Peter with disbelieving eyes.

"Peter, your mother just started trusting me. I don't want her to think I'm the bad influence in our relationship, when it's really you."

Peter looked at Jo dumbfounded, recognizing that what she said was true. He was the real troublemaker.

"You're right, Jo, and I wouldn't ask for me, but I'm asking for Oso. Help me get him to a vet tomorrow, and I promise I'll never put you in this position again."

"Okay, but you'd better never, ever again. You've gone seriously ape. Let's get some sleep."

Jo set her alarm for five-thirty before curling back into her bed. Peter fell asleep on the floor, with Oso's shallow breathing in his ear. He popped up at the first gray light of dawn, shut off the alarm before it rang, and carried Oso to the flower bed outside. Racing home across the campus, he stopped at the elm to retrieve his bat. It was gone.

At home, Peter's room seemed empty without Oso. Tired and beaten, he lay in bed looking out the window at the dawn's growing light. Peter knew that men should not cry when they are hurt, but he did not know if his great friend would survive the day, and he could not help himself when

he started to cry.

16

A TANINNUAQ

“I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW Oso got out last night,” Mr. Miller said. “I locked all the doors and said goodnight to him before we went to bed.”

Laying across much of the back seat on an old bed cover, Oso's breathing was still difficult, but he seemed more comfortable slightly propped up on Jo's lap.

“He must've jumped out of my window and hurt himself. Maybe he saw a bird or squirrel and went to chase it.”

“Do you really think he'd jump out of a second story window to chase a squirrel? I could see him jumping if he thought one of us was in trouble, but chasing a squirrel? And how did he get as far as Jo's yard?”

“I hope he's okay,” Jo said softly, stroking Oso's head with her gentle hands.

“I hope so, too, Jo,” Mr. Miller agreed.

At the clinic, Peter carried Oso inside to the exam table, for Dr. Keegan to examine him.

“I think Oso has some bruised and broken ribs,” Dr. Keegan said, removing his stethoscope. “One of the ribs

may have punctured a lung, leaking air into his chest. We'll take X-rays to be sure, and if there isn't a lot of air I can probably get it out with a needle and a syringe. Most of the time, when we remove the air, the lung inflates again and seals itself."

"Will he be okay?" Mr. Miller asked. "How long will it take him to heal?"

"That depends on how well he does over the next week," Dr. Keegan said gravely. "Does the air return? How much air and how fast? If it comes back quickly and collapses a part of the lung again, we'll have to place a chest tube, but with good treatment he should recover. He also has a large cut below his shoulder and up under his elbow."

Dr. Keegan rolled Oso on his back, extending his front left leg and pointing out a long gash, through his fur and skin, up under the joint of the leg. Peter hadn't noticed it the night before, and Jo turned her head away. The gash was very deep but almost bloodless.

"That will need about twenty stitches," Dr. Keegan said bluntly. "Oso should stay here with us for two to three days at least. We'll keep him sedated and let him rest. If he gets off to a good start these serious injuries will heal."

"We want you to do your best for him, Dr. Keegan," Mr. Miller said. "He's a good dog who found his way into some bad trouble."

"I better get started, because we don't have much time to lose. I'll call you this afternoon, to let you know what we've

found out, and how he's coming along."

On the drive home Peter and Jo gazed out of their respective windows in silence. Mr. Miller flipped through the radio stations, finally finding a jazz station playing Dave Brubeck's *'Take Five'*, a suitable rhythm for their separate thoughts.

"Call me and let me know what you find out, Peter," Jo said, when she was dropped off. "Thank you for letting me come, Mr. Miller."

"No, thank you, Jo, for finding and helping Oso."

After Peter and his father returned home, Mr. Miller went through the backyard, looking up at Peter's window.

"That's a high jump down. I wonder whatever possessed him. I don't want you opening your window when Oso is in your room. I guess we can't trust him anymore."

Peter knew Oso could be trusted, and it pained him to think that his father had lost faith in him. Peter trudged up to his room and stretched out on his bunk, falling into an exhausted and restless sleep. He had a dream of standing on a beach while a large storm at sea drove gigantic waves over the shore. It seemed that many people he knew were in danger from the storm. A call went out for persons of faith to wade into the sea and calm the waters. In the dream, Peter did not feel he was one of the persons with enough faith to wade into the water. He saw Jo and Commissioner Scott rowing together, as a wall of water collapsed over them, swallowing their boat. Peter was unable to move from the

beach because of the fear and dread paralyzing him. He woke up in an anxious sweat. His inability to take action in the dream and help his friends shamed him. It was two-fifteen in the afternoon.

Peter jumped down from his bunk, resolve pumping through his nerves, like liquid metal. He wanted to face his fears with action, and his biggest fear at the moment was for Oso. He decided to get dressed, go to Karen's house, meet Ataninnuaq and humbly seek his counsel on Oso's recovery. He would do that for his friend. Thirty minutes later he was knocking on Karen's front door. Peter expected Karen to answer but a man about his own height, in a blue work shirt and holding a grim wooden mask over his face, surprised him at the door. The mouth on the mask was eerily contorted and bright red, with feathers and stiff bristled hair tufting the mask's outline.

"I am always ready for trouble when it comes to my door," the man said. "Today it is in the form of a young man, but that is often the case. Come in."

"Are you Ataninnuaq?"

"Since you know my name, I can lower my mask."

Ataninnuaq set aside the mask, motioning with his rough right hand for Peter to sit down on the familiar green couch, while he took a seat across from Peter, in a rocking chair. He looked into Peter's eyes with his own dark eyes. The eyebrows, mustache and goatee were dark, but Ataninnuaq's shoulder length hair had as much gray as black.

"I have one thing you seek," Ataninnuaq said, and he left the room, returning momentarily with Peter's Louisville Slugger in his hand.

"You wielded it well in battle, and lucky for you your black dog came to your side. Otherwise, curtains for you, Rocky," Ataninnuaq said, before adding, "I would like to know, can you see me?"

"Of course I see you, you're sitting right in front of me." "If I choose not to be seen I cannot be seen. I would be somewhere else. You must learn the art. You are plain to your enemies. You allow them to find you where they expect to find you."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you expect to see me at the door?"

"No, sir. I expected to see Karen."

"Is Karen here?"

"I guess not."

"She is not here because I asked her to leave. I knew you were coming and I chose to be here and let you see me. You came looking for me, but when you saw me my presence surprised you, isn't it true?"

"Yes, sir."

"You surprised me with your absence last night, and it is not easy to surprise a shaman. I warned you your enemies were looking to find you outside late at night. Last night I expected to find you in your room, and I did not. I urged your dog to find your scent. I followed him to find you."

"You were in my room?" Peter said with alarm. "You let Oso out? How did you get in?"

"My spirit visited your room, not my body. My spirit was keeping vigil over you, as I told you I would. You needed your dog's help, and he was happy to help because he is a warrior."

Another wave of painful gratitude and sadness hit Peter, and for the second time that day he wept. He wiped his tears away, feeling foolish for crying in front of Ataninnuaq.

"Men cry from relief, sorrow, and joy. Where do your tears come from?"

"I'm not happy, and I'm not relieved," Peter said. "They must be from sorrow."

"You feel sorrow for your dog and yourself, but he is happy you and he are alive. Your misery is greater than his, and it cannot heal him. Be as brave and joyful as he is. You are in another miserable mess, and this time there is a girl involved, the girl with the unusual eyes, who you went to visit last night."

"Jo? How do you know about her?"

"I *see* the girl, Jo, because I *will* it. Peter, you are like a spreading infection right now. You have will but you are afraid to develop it. If you do not begin to use your will, your habit of lying to yourself and others will make tremendous trouble for you and everyone you meet."

"I do use my willpower, but my messes are getting bigger and bigger. I don't know how to stop making them."

"Right now your willpower is serving your lies. *True will* is not the same as willpower. True will is the power to know truth and choose truth. When you do the best you can, using the best you know, you gradually develop the power to *see the truth* and serve it. True will sacrifices itself for others. Willpower and willfulness serve *self*, and they are not true will. Do you *see* the difference? You are in battle with powerful and dark forces, and it is good that you have placed yourself on a determined path to set things right, but it will be a painful path."

"What can I do to help Oso and Jo?"

"You must be true to yourself and them. You must heal Oso, and let Jo find her own path through her sorrow and loss. She is your weakness, but you can use your strength to help her. The red stone at her neck magnifies the burden of a great loss she feels, and she looks to you to help lift that burden. These are the required sacrifices. Do you *see* the path?"

Peter became very quiet and still inside. An inner vibration resonated to Ataninnuaq's words, and Peter *saw* the truth. As much as he wanted Jo for himself, he would never have her for his own, and he must let her go. The knowledge was painful and the root of a hideous jealousy loosened and ripped free from the depths of his soul. Peter wept for a third time, this time with deep, wracking sobs. Ataninnuaq came beside him, holding him at his shoulders.

"These tears flow from all three rivers - sorrow, joy and

relief. Let them out and be strong."

It took a long while before Peter regained his composure. He felt cleansed of jealousy and remorse, but he was very tired and his body felt numb and immobile. Ataninnuaq left him on the couch and returned to the rocker.

"That is good. You *see* and accept things, and now we can discuss these beings who attacked you. I will give you the talismans I spoke of yesterday, and I would like to see Udjuk. We needed to have this man-to-man talk, don't you agree?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Let me present your gifts."

Ataninnuaq rose from the rocker and left the room. Peter dug Udjuk out of his pocket, still bound in his metal halo, and placed him on the side table at the rocker. Ataninnuaq returned to the room with an object, handing it to Peter, before sitting down in the rocker again. He studied Udjuk from every angle, while Peter looked at the gift in his hand. A miniature drum with painted designs, dangled from a leather neck strap. A small wooden bat hung from the top of the drum, and kept a soft beat to the wearer's movements.

"It is a *qilaut* made from caribou skin. I carved the drum stick in the shape of a baseball bat. The handle is wrapped with seal skin and Udjuk is not happy about that, but he is only a rock and what does he know?"

Ataninnuaq returned Udjuk, and Peter twirled the *qilaut* bat between his fingers.

"The size and shape of the wood does not matter," Ataninnuaq said. "Good spirits inhabit clean wood, and knocking on wood calls the good spirits. You are a natural with wood, and the wood spirits protect you. These Nephilim are not natural beings. They have many weaknesses in our world, but they bring unusual abilities from theirs. Whatever one calls them they are evil."

"What do they want?"

"The Nephilim wander an empty and lifeless void. Ages past, the source of all life cast them from the living world into the dead world. Their priest is casting powerful spells and magic to enter the living world again, and he will not cease or rest until he has either succeeded or failed in restoring his kind."

Peter scratched at his flushed cheeks with his short nails, and rubbed his chin and neck.

"I'm just a teenager. Why are they coming after me?"

"They cannot move forward without removing you. In this town, Williamsport, in 1956, the source of all life has placed *you* like an immense stone in their path. A moment of destiny is waiting for you and them, and to arrive untroubled in heart, and awake, at that moment, is all you can do. The priest *sees* your weakness in Jo, even as I do, and he will use her for protection, against you."

"I feel like a prisoner," Peter said. "I can't go anywhere without seeing these Nephilim."

"Freedom and fear cannot live together, one dies and the

other lives. Every person chooses which path they will travel."

Peter squared his shoulders and slung the qilaut around his neck.

"I choose freedom," he said.

Ataninnuaq nodded.

"The qilaut will help. Wear it whenever you travel from your home," he said. Outside, a car turned into the drive. "Karen and her mother have returned. Peter, we can talk again at a later time, but I believe you are doing well."

"Thank you. I think I'm more awake, and more tired, than I've ever been."

Peter stood when Karen came in the door. She smiled and greeted him with a nose kiss. Ataninnuaq cleared his throat, looking at Peter through the top of his eyes with concern.

"Some things I don't see coming," he said, "until they are right in front of me."

Mrs. Croft and Karen drove Peter home to get his equipment, and then to baseball practice, where he wore the *qilaut* talisman beneath his t-shirt. His right hand was fully healed, and he shrugged off the soreness from the previous night's blows. He whipped balls to second base as if he had a sniper's scope for an eye and a gun barrel for an arm. He chased down every foul ball and powered pitches to the fences with his reclaimed bat.

"Chumbucket's arm is a slingshot," Coach Lundsford remarked to Coach Jaworzky. "Dead on. He's peaking at the

right time. Everybody's looking good."

After practice Peter decided to visit Jo, but he didn't knock on her window; instead, he went to her front door and stood his duffel aside before he knocked. Momentarily, Jo's bare feet pattered to the door.

"Hi, Peter. I've worried about you all day. I'm glad you stopped by."

"Hey, Jo. Can we sit out on your porch?"

"Sure, bean. What's up?" Jo answered, sitting beside Peter on a glider bench, facing the street.

"We need to talk. I think about you all the time and I really like you. You're pretty, and smart..."

"Peter, not really..." Jo attempted to protest, but Peter fought through her objections.

"No, honestly, you're smart. Smart in ways I'll never be, and the problem is you're right about everything you said last night. I'm the troublemaker. I'm jealous of you. Like, really jealous. Ugly jealous."

They looked out together on the empty street for a moment without speaking, before Jo reached out and held Peter's hand and he continued.

"I went to see Karen's grandfather today, before baseball practice, and we went over a lot of stuff that woke me up. Jo, I think I need to let you go as a girlfriend, so that I can keep you as a friend."

"Oh, Peter!" Jo's voice trembled, and a small tear welled up in her gray eye. "This is the 'let's be friends' talk, isn't it?"

You're breaking up with me."

The Reading Railroad train whistle sounded in the distance. Locusts and tireless crickets began tuning up for their evening symphony. Jo brushed her brimming tears away.

"I should have followed Elvis' advice," Jo murmured, letting out a small tear-choked laugh. "It's all my fault for moving things along between us; I wanted a nice boyfriend. If I'd left you alone, you never would have become jealous and possessive. I've always had that effect on guys. I knew this was coming. I hate it."

"I still want to spend time with you," Peter said.

"How is that even possible? I've been imagining us dating this next year at school," Jo continued, releasing a sob trapped in her throat. "You know, going to the prom, and then later, going away to college together. Being with you made me want something more. I felt better about myself, about where my life was headed. I wanted to improve my grades. Peter and Jo, the sound of our names together made me happy. And now what? How many steps back do I take? Do I wave to you from across the street? Do I avoid you in the halls this fall? *So awkward*. What an idiot I am."

"You're not an idiot. I'm the idiot."

"Maybe we both are," Jo said, rising from the glider and embracing Peter in a hug. "Take care of yourself, Peter."

"You too."

Peter walked across the green lawn towards the college.

The Summer Set

Jo stood on her grand porch watching him to the college gates, where Peter stopped to see her a last time, but she'd already turned to go inside. All that was left to him was the distant slap of her screen against the door frame.

17

KAREN'S TRANCE

THE NEXT MORNING, ATANINNUAQ AND Karen drove with the Millers to the clinic to visit Oso. The clinic assistant brought him out to greet the party, and each nose or cheek offered received a dog kiss.

"His breathing is better, but he's still weak. He should stay another two days until he's out of the woods," Dr. Keegan said. He pointed out two cracked ribs, a more severe break and a collapsed lung on the x-rays. "I was able to re-inflate the lung, and it's staying open."

"Can I speak to you in private, Dr. Keegan?" Mr. Miller asked, leaving the room with Dr. Keegan. Ataninnuaq opened Oso's snout to check his teeth and gums.

"Oso's breath, eyes and teeth tell much about him, but not as much as listening to him. He is feeling better and he feels very special that everyone is here to see him."

"How do you know what he's thinking?" Janice asked. "He tells me and I listen. Oso has a sense of humor. He understands why we are here. Janice, he says if you and he share a room he wants you to stay on your side, and don't

mess with his blankets. He really wants a new squeak toy. Also, he hopes you don't expect him to sleep on the floor."

"I'd like to talk to him, too," Janice said. "Tell him he's a good boy and I love him."

"You just told him. He heard you and he loves you. You receive thoughts and feelings from animals all the time. You just need to learn to listen to them. After a while it becomes easy to know what they want. Sit with him and talk and you'll find he is a real chatterbox."

"How did you learn to talk with animals?" Peter asked. "The first time I talked with a dog it was a little

surprising, but not a great surprise. I was nine and I was going ice fishing, hunting with my spear, when my dog, Pakak, said 'Good-bye', and his thought was very clear to me. I heard it in my mind but it was the same as with my ears, and perhaps more clear. I said 'Good-bye, Pakak' and left the camp. When I came back in the evening from fishing he was gone. I never saw him again. He was old and unable to work anymore. He was really saying 'good-bye' for good and not just for the day. He went off to die so the Yup'ik would not have to feed him. Pakak did not want to burden his family, but he did not want to leave without saying good-bye. Sacrifice is often the way of the Yup'ik in hard winters."

"That's sad," Janice said. "If you'd known, you could've told him to stay."

"Pakak was proud and brave. No soul can tell another what to do and when. He chose his time to leave."

"Oso's not ready to leave like Pakak," Janice informed the group. "He wants spaghetti at home."

Everyone laughed, and Janice looked from face to face.

"Really, he wants spaghetti."

Mr. Miller came back into the room at the tail end of the discussion, and Janice looked at him as the only serious person available.

"Daddy, Oso wants spaghetti when he comes home. Can he have some?"

"It's good to hear he's feeling well enough to think about food. I doubt Dr. Keegan would approve of spaghetti, but if you guys are able to get him feeling well enough to eat it, it's okay with me. It's time for us to go now. Oso, we'll have your place fixed up when you come home."

Oso wagged his tail weakly as they left the kennel area. On the drive to Karen's house, Mr. Miller, Peter and Ataninnuaq discussed baseball.

"Who do you think will win the batting title, Ted Williams or Mickey Mantle?" Peter asked.

"Tough question, Chum. Ted's a great hitter, but Mantle is awful fast. He gets a lot of hits just out-running the ball, but I think it'll be Ted, because he's the smarter player. Mantle is just hell-bent-for-leather, and it will cost him someday."

"You're probably right, but I like Mickey Mantle better."

"Mickey is very popular," Ataninnuaq commented. "I see him on cereal boxes in Alaska."

Mr. Miller dropped Ataninnuaq and Karen off at her house.

"It was nice to meet you, Ataninnuaq. You're welcome anytime in our home."

"Thank you, Pete," Ataninnuaq said, moving his left hand in a circle over his heart. "Chimo."

Karen felt the need to explain her grandfather to Mr. Miller.

"Chimo means hello or good-bye in Inuit, and the sign means to come, go, or even trade in peace."

"Thank you for educating me, Karen," Mr. Miller smiled. "Chimo."

At home Karen went to her room to think, but found herself unable to relax and concentrate. At the dining table, her grandfather was patiently fashioning a net made of metal beads, and she sat down to help string the beads. Squeezing a shiny black bead of hematite between her thumb and forefinger to fit in the net, she asked what they were making.

"A gift for your friend, Mike," Ataninnuaq smiled. "He is coming over because you are going to call him."

"How did you know? I didn't say anything."

"You want to take action, and Mike is quick to act."

Karen stuck her tongue out at her grandfather before calling Mike to invite him over.

"Bring that ring," Karen requested.

"Ring? What ring?"

"*You know.*"

"Oh, yeah, *that ring.*"

When Mike arrived Karen led him to her room, where he sat on her bed, tapping the end of a flute hanging from a leather strap on her wall. It swung back and forth on its nail like a clock pendulum.

"Do you play this thing?"

"Yes, but it's been a while. It's for ceremonies, to accompany an elder telling a story or legend."

"Play me something."

Karen unhooked the flute and put it to her lips, coaxing out a short haunting melody. She abruptly set it down on her bed.

"I asked you over here for something more important than diddling a tune," she said. "Mike, we nearly got killed the other night, and we both know these Nephilim are real and here to stay. We need a plan to protect ourselves."

"They're rotten eggs, that's for sure," Mike nodded. "You have to pinky swear you won't tell anybody, but Jo and I set 'em back some. They had a big operation there at Skytop."

"Did you have something to do with that explosion?" Karen asked in astonishment, before quickly withdrawing the question. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"And remember, you and I got rid of Jim-Bob at the crematorium," Mike added, as he handed Karen the gemstone ring from Jim-Bob's finger. "Here's the ring you wanted. We're not doing too bad, so far."

"Maybe," Karen allowed, "but we both know they'll be back, whatever they are..."

"What I'd really like to know is how Blackthorne's staff works. There's not a single mention of it in Maddie's files. If I could get my hands on that staff, I'd for sure chase those goons out of town."

"We need them removed from this world, Mike, not just our town. You said the files reference ancient history back to the Bible, and I have an idea. My grandfather trained me to go into trance when I was young, so that the spirit realm would become as familiar to me as water. The only way I know to uncover what the Nephilim want is to explore their world, in trance. That's why I asked you over, to help me."

Overall, Mike remained of the mind that these mysterious matters of the Nephilim would eventually prove to have purely natural explanations. Karen slid next to him so they could review her written instructions together, and when she did the mattress sank between them, plunging them bodily into each other. To steady herself, Karen's hand clutched Mike's knee, and Mike sprang up.

"Sit back down, silly," Karen said, pulling him down beside her. She fit the gemstone ring on her left thumb. "I believe this gemstone will help me contact their dimension. I'll begin by lying down and closing my eyes. You'll see me start to breathe deeply and it will look like I'm going to sleep. Watch my eyelids and count each of my breaths aloud, so I can hear your voice. When my eyes start

fluttering, I'll need your voice to guide me."

"Guide you where?"

"To wherever these Nephilim come from," Karen said. "I wrote down a general script for how to conduct the trance session, on this notepad. If there's any trouble, pull this ring off my finger. I also wrote some questions to ask. I won't remember much, if anything, when I return from trance, so take good notes and record my answers. Look over the questions while I get ready."

Covering Karen with a warm quilt, Mike couldn't help admiring her dark hair and soft curves. Karen's chest rose and fell evenly, and at the count of seven Mike noticed her eyelids fluttering. On cue, he began reading her written instructions aloud.

"Stay with my voice. Deep, deep asleep, going deeper, and deeper, beneath our world. Deeper, and deeper, into the realm of the Nephilim. Listen to my voice, deeper into the Nephilim realm..."

Karen found herself in a gray wasteland, a universe of sand hills and caves where perpetual winds and electrical storms whipped barren dunes. An oppressive half-light shaped its grainy horizon. She entered one of a thousand caves, interpreting symbols lining the cave walls and journeying up and down a nest of tunnels. Listening to the wind whistling through the cave, her sense of direction vanished, but she did not panic. She followed the sound of the wind, thinking it would lead her out, but then she

remembered she was in a thought dimension. It might not be a real place, but only a dream, her interpretation of what existence might be if there was no imagination or variation in its creation. No wonder the Nephilim wanted into the green and blue world of human imagination.

"I'm with your voice," Karen whispered in trance to Mike. "I hear the echoes of the Nephilim's thoughts. Numbers and symbols are important to them. They do everything by numbers. Their minds are slaves to numbers. Three is an important number to them. It gives them power. They want a steady supply of living human bodies as their numbers grow. Control of the baseball league is nearly complete. Baseball is a game of numbers. They'll take bodies in greater numbers, as the appointed time arrives for the priest to take a living body for himself - '*The Summation*' they call it. Sums matter. Three. The earth. The moon. The sun. The sum of the power of three heavenly bodies combining their power. The eighteenth is in the ninth lunar month. Six plus six plus six makes eighteen. Three sixes. One plus eight is nine. Three times three is nine. Nineteen-Fifty-Six is powerful. It's a thirty. Three times ten. One plus nine is ten plus five is fifteen plus six is twenty-one. Twenty-one is two plus one, is three. Seven plus seven plus seven is twenty-one. Seven is the number of hidden mysteries. Three sevens. Three times is the greatest power to which any spell can be raised."

While climbing up a ladder carved into the face of a high

sandstone wall, Karen sensed the Nephilim in her vicinity. The wind was leaving the cave through a tunnel at the top of the wall. She was almost there when she heard the echoes of claws scratching and speeding through the tunnels behind her.

"The Nephilim know I'm here. They have claws. I'm looking for a way out. Please hurry with the questions."

"All right, all right," Mike said, creases appearing on his brow. "We'll speed things up. When, where, and how will they carry out their plan?"

"August eighteenth during the full lunar eclipse. The priest must transfer his soul under perfect conditions. He's searching for another metal structure, to replace the destroyed Skytop gate. The new structure must be capable of conducting the moon's raised energy, during the eclipse."

"Anything else can you tell me?" Mike asked. Karen's breathing was even, and he put the notes aside. "What could take the gate's place?"

Karen swallowed and licked her dry lips. "Something tall...very tall...metal...any tall metal structure will serve. The numbers must be perfect. Three times three, a nine. It must be a nine. Sixty-three feet tall. Six and three is nine. Yes, sixty-three feet tall, exactly, will work perfectly. The power of the moon in eclipse, the combined powers of the earth, the sun and moon will triple the energies of the stones and loosen the knitting between the living body and soul of the humans. The Nephilim can use the rubies to force the

human soul from its healthy body. The Nephilim will possess the bodies and use them for a normal human lifetime, allowing them to live in the earth long enough to gain control, and then eternally farm the humans for bodies. The Summation is so close. So many are surrounding me. Wake me please, bring me back."

"There are a few more questions."

Karen's throat flushed, and Mike noticed her jaw moving, as if she were grinding her teeth. Her eyes opened and she looked at him, smiling, but speaking in another voice.

"Hi, Mike, it's Bob! Remember me? We're all together again, aren't we? You weren't very nice to ol' Jim, were you? What am I going to do with you two snoops?"

Mike quickly pulled the ring off Karen's thumb. Her body convulsed, and she cried out.

"Karen, wake up, now!"

Karen's eyes popped open, and she stared at the ceiling for about twenty seconds.

"What was going on?" Mike asked.

"I don't know," Karen answered vaguely, tasting blood on her lip. She wiped it away with her forefinger. "I just woke up. I always wake up from trance hungry. What did I say?"

"A lot, but I had to wake you before I could get more. You really had me scared for a minute there."

"It's coming back to me, like a dream," Karen said,

leaning in closely to Mike. She softly pressed her forehead and nose to his. "You were all I had. That was a scary place."

Karen's tenderness stirred something in Mike, and impulsively his hand turned her cheek and brought her lips to his. Karen flushed and turned away. The kiss was over as quickly as it began. She gently took his hand down and held it. Her lips burned where Mike's had brushed them.

"Gee, I'm not having much luck with the ladies lately," Mike said. His left hand fumbled with the flute. "At least you didn't throw up on me this time."

"Mike, I'm sorry. You caught me off guard. Any misunderstanding is my fault. I sometimes forget that a kunik isn't the same in Williamsport as it is in my home village."

"What's a kunik?"

"A kunik is an Inuit kiss. Nose to nose, or nose to forehead. It's not meant to excite. It shows affection between good friends."

"We *are* good friends," Mike said. "Aren't we?"

Karen stroked his hand and smiled. She liked being with Mike and she didn't mind his kiss. He was exciting and bold. Her first impulse had been to kiss him back, but she wasn't sure why she wanted to, or where she wanted it to go. She told herself not to cross that river.

"I hope we'll always be good friends. I know I can trust you. You saved my life at the funeral home and I haven't forgotten."

Mike blushed and stood from the bed.

"I better get going. Everything I wrote down is mostly chicken-scratch, so I'll write it out neater and more complete at home. You don't need to show me out. I'll call you later."

Mike left her room so fast Karen was unable to move, but Ataninnuaq looked up from the table where he was working as Mike raced out.

"Mike," Ataninnuaq called out. "A question for you. How do you defeat an enemy who is your friend?"

"Sir?" Mike halted with his hand on the doorknob. His flustered brain could make no sense of Ataninnuaq's question. "What?"

"You cannot always use a bone knife," Ataninnuaq said. "You might hurt a friend. Not every enemy we encounter will remain one."

He approached Mike at the door, holding out a club in his left hand and a net in his right.

"I made and blessed these useful weapons for you."

Mike took the offered gifts. The first was a smoothly polished club, its handle wound with leather. The second was a hefty net of sinew sewn through with metal beads and tied with fine knots. The net's metallic fabric rippled as Mike slid it across his open palm.

"The club is an arctic bear's hip bone. You knock your opponent out with a quick shallow blow here -" Ataninnuaq pointed to Mike's temple. "Not too hard, and the other is a spirit-catcher. The metal beads in the net are blood ore and

will attract the Nephilim, like magnets. The Nephilim spirits are electrical and flow easily through metal and flesh, but not bone and wood. If you catch a Nephilim spirit outside its human host, throw this blood ore net over the spirit and trap it swiftly. Handle the spirits carefully or they will escape."

"Are you sure you want me to have these?" Mike asked. "I don't know if I'll ever use them."

"I made them for you. Keep them near at all times. Chimo."

That evening, an awakened and activated Mike stayed chained to his desk, pouring through Maddie's files. He was beginning to accept explanations he could not see or touch. The files suggested there really was a God-given soul, something like an eternal power generator that constantly produced life energy. Maybe there was something to the idea of a spiritual dimension that underlay the physical universe. A summons from the front doorbell dislodged his mind from its deep studies, and he answered the door in his pajamas. Peter was on the other side of the screen.

"Hey, Chum, at last, just like old times. Seems we've only crossed paths at practice lately. I understand. I come in second to the ladies."

Mike led the way to his creatively disordered room. Books lay open on the dresser and bed, sheets of paper were loosely scattered across his desk, with diagrams and scrawled notes covering the pages of a notebook. Mike

pushed aside some of the books on the bed to make a seat for Peter, and he handed him a large heavy gold coin.

"What's this?"

"My dad brought it home after the war and gave it to me. It's worth a lot of money, but it's also worthless. It's kind of a cursed coin. It's a 1924 Saint-Gaudens double eagle, and it's illegal to own. When Roosevelt ended the gold standard in 1933, people had to turn all their gold coins in to melt down, to exchange for paper money. Getting gold out of ordinary people's hands was part of their plan. It says so in the files. Gold is real money. This double eagle must have made its way out of America, to Europe, before the confiscation. I found it again, rummaging in my closet."

"That's wild. If it's illegal to own, what can you do with it?"

"Nothing really, but I keep it around because I think it's cool."

Mike took the coin from Peter and sat back down at his desk.

"You know, that night we all bowled together, Karen and I peeked in the windows at Whitson's Crematorium and saw bodies lying in vats of red fluid. I also saw what a Nephilim really looks like. It's a blue ball of electricity. We got caught snooping and nearly got the chop that night, but that's another story. The point I want to make is that a week later, I saw Blackthorne's men herding some teens, from the back of a trailer, into the Crematorium. I think the Nephilim are

running some sort of assembly line for processing humans at Whitson's. Processing them for what I don't know, but nothing good."

"We've almost gotten the chop twice this summer, and it's only half over," Peter said.

"Dying is real if you think about it, but I don't. You've seen Jo's necklace, what do you think of it? I think it's Maddie's necklace, the same one Blackthorne took from me."

"Agreed, but good luck getting it off her. She thinks it's a gift from her father."

"We're going to have to knock her out to get it off her," Mike said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Also, I discovered something about you and Jo in Maddie's files. Remember the night of the town hall meeting? You said Blackthorne was particularly interested in the two of you. That didn't make any sense to me, because you're nothing special, even if Jo is. But I was wrong. These Nephilim know the bloodlines of every single person in Williamsport. They can track us and trace us, and your bloodline goes back to Abel in the Bible."

"You saw that in the files?" Peter said, awed. "That's crazy."

"Every kid in town has a bloodline score. I was in there, too. I'm pretty much a mutt."

"No shame in that. Oso's a mutt. Mutts are usually the best ones. What about Jo?"

"Her bloodline traces all the way back to Cain, and the Nephilim honor his bloodline. So she's like royalty to them. In their religion, Jo's left eye is proof of her specialness, a genetic bloodline marker of royalty. These Nephilim believe Cain was the spawn of Satan and Eve. Satan was a giant and the leader of The Fallen. They believe they're the superior race. So Jo's ancestor, Cain, killed your ancestor, Abel. What do you think of that, buddy-boy? It was the world's first murder and God punished Cain. The Nephilim hate both God and humanity. They want humans dead, or our DNA altered with their own. That's their plan and they're sticking with it."

"Holy smoke. Blue sparkly aliens."

"Yeah, blue sparkly aliens," Mike laughed. "That's exactly what they are. I also found some Polaroids of Jim and Leslie in a file cabinet at Whitson's. They were tied up and gagged in the trunk of a car. The license plate on the car in the Polaroid was the same as one I traced back to Whitson, UP6561A. I'm reasonably sure that Jim's never coming back. Nothing yet on Leslie. There are hundreds of kids in other Polaroids. I wonder where they all come from? Are they runaways? Anyway, I can't report my new findings to Maddie or ask her anything. She's not doing much better. I go by and see her about once a week. I'm keeping an eye out for her. I called the FBI office in Los Angeles to help her out."

"You did? What happened? Who answered?"

"An executive assistant," Mike said. "I was talking in my deep voice, like this..."

Mike demonstrated his low voice, and Peter thought it was suitably impressive.

"The woman said Madeline Hanson was out on medical leave. I said I was J. Edgar Hoover, and I wanted Madeline Hanson's full pay returned to her as soon as possible, with a raise! I said she was the best damn investigator on the Blackthorne case and it wasn't going very damn well without her. I wanted her back on the job, as soon as she was well! The woman said 'Yes, sir. Is there anything else, sir?' and I said, 'No, get it done!' and slammed the phone down on its hook. I wish you'd been there. I was laughing my ass off."

"If I'd been there I would've wrestled the phone away from you."

Mike and Peter exchanged a knowing smile. They were a team again. Mike turned to the drawings, sketches and notes on his desk.

"I've worked out this magic show for the carnival. It's difficult, but a good show has to have scale and grandeur. Egypt came to me when I was looking through all this Biblical stuff. I watched DeMille's 'Ten Commandments', and I'm using the movie for ideas on how things should look, as well as books by Blackstone and Thurston for the magic trick itself."

Peter ruffled through the papers. One set contained the

bare outlines of a stage with drawings of Egyptian gods at each end. Dotted lines and arrows directed stick figures around the stage. Other papers contained more detailed information for the sarcophagus construction, and ideas for how the fire magic might work.

"Mr. Croft is going to help me build whatever I come up with, but we really need to get started to finish the stage and trick before August 18th."

"Have you figured out how your trick's going to work yet?"

"I want to do a trick that's never been done before. I want to burn somebody alive and bring them back from the dead."

"That doesn't sound like a good idea to me. It might go up in smoke," Peter grinned.

"Hardy-har-har," Mike groaned. "The show is totally safe, bullet-proof. I have two Egyptian princesses, one is Jo, and the other is a mannequin. The fire will look more dramatic and dangerous than it actually is. I'll use varied mixtures of salts and minerals to burn in different colors - like boric acid and methanol gives you a green flame, and so on. We'll strap Jo to the flip-side of a board that'll turn her right-side up to finish the trick. I'll need your help with that part."

"How?"

"You're going underneath the stage with Jo. When it's time to flip the board, you'll turn the crank. The crank will bring the burning mannequin to you, and if there's any fire

you'll put it out with an extinguisher."

"Oh, no I won't. I'm not getting pulled into any more of your fire ceremonies."

"Oh, but you will," Mike insisted, his eyes gleaming with flaming pillars of delight. "So let it be written, so let it be done!"

18

WILKES – BARRE

PETER'S THOUGHTS DRIFTED OUT THE bus window into the soft rain's sketchy mist. He passed time counting the black cows in the dismal fields, and tracing droplets of water squirming up the slipstream with his finger. His teammates only existed as reflections in the wet glass. Poppie and Jeremy blew spit wads from a straw at their teammates' exposed necks, before looking away innocently when their targets turned around. The Williamsport All-Stars, dubbed the 'Millionaires', were traveling to the Pennsylvania State Championships in Wilkes-Barre. A win would land them in the Bantam League World Series, back home in Williamsport. Turning to Peter, Mike put down his crossword puzzle.

"Coach Lundsford told me I'm starting in the championship game."

"How's your arm?"

"It's strong like a bull," Mike said, flexing his right bicep.

"How's your hand?"

"Ready for duty."

Opening and closing his grip several times, Peter unexpectedly seized Mike's arm, refusing to let it go.

"You cannot escape my Death Grip."

Mike wrestled, but was unable to pull free. Peter let Mike's arm go after proving his point. Mike pulled his cap down to lay back in the upholstered seat.

"This bus is pretty cool. I've never ridden in one this nice. We're really high up off the road."

When the bus pulled into the Wilkes-Barre Holiday Inn, dampened sunlight glowed behind thinned spots in the long cloud line. The players dropped their bags in the lobby, investigating every corner of the hotel while the coaches checked in. Mike and Peter walked to the end of the outside second floor balcony, where Mike scanned the city using binoculars he brought along for the trip.

"Great binoculars, I see three easy crimes I could commit."

Peter borrowed the binoculars, sweeping the lenses over the landscape, and studying the construction site of a highway corridor. Earth-movers pushed huge piles of dirt and rock into smooth slopes, perfect for sledding.

"That looks like fun," Peter said. "Some guys are sledding on the embankment with pieces of cardboard."

"Don't hog the binoculars," Mike complained, pulling at the strap to take them back. "Let me have a look."

Mike agreed the dirt sledding looked wildly fun and dangerous.

"We should hike over there before we leave. We've seen everything. Let's get in our swim trunks and go down to the pool."

At the pool, a constant line formed at the diving board as the teens tried to outdo each other. Cannonball dives exploded at the pool's surface like depth charges, and each diver brought a cheer or jeer from the waiting line. The coaches smoked cigarettes to calm their nerves, playing cards at a table by the pool. Mike and Peter noticed a sizable group of players inside the lobby, crowding around a table.

"You guys better get in line," a player from another semi-final team shouted. "A pretty girl is giving away chocolate bars, if you sign a sheet."

"Come on, Chum. Chocolate and a pretty girl are worth our time."

Peter and Mike's eyes went wide when they discovered the pretty girl was none other than Jo, outfitted in her Blackthorne Youth uniform, seated between Deck Gaines and Conrad Bolger at a folding table in the hotel lobby. Long lines of players from competing teams waited for one of the chocolate bars stacked in front of her. Mr. Whitson stood to the side of the table, letting Jo's warm smile and Deck's bullying grin grow the Blackthorne Youth membership. Peter excused himself to their room when Mike went forward. Jo waved as Mike approached the table. Her cascade of long blonde hair had vanished, replaced by a shoulder-length bob cut.

"No cutting the line," Conrad snarled.

"Get bent, nosebleed," Mike said. "I'm just here to see Jo."

"I'll be back in a minute, Deck," Jo said. "Conrad, can you hand out the chocolate, please?"

Conrad's teeth retreated behind his thin lips, and the disappointed teens at the front of the waiting line followed Jo with their eyes as she walked outside with Mike.

"What are you doing here?" Mike asked. "You didn't tell us you were coming."

"I'm trying to stay out of trouble, Mike. We came to Wilkes-Barre for the day because the championship teams are in town. Ted is still black-mailing me. I want to keep my license and stay off summer restriction."

"Ain't that a bite," Mike said, looking past Jo to Whitson.

"I'm trying to make it grundy. Don't worry. I'm keeping up with all your stage props."

"You've chopped your hair," Mike grieved. "It was so pretty."

"Maybe to you," Jo frowned. "It was a bother to keep up, and I didn't know who I was doing it for anymore, so I cut it off. Look, I better go back inside."

Mr. Whitson smiled and waved as Mike passed through the lines. Mike stared at Whitson and held up his pop bottle in ironic salute. He rejoined Peter in their hotel room, where they sat glumly on the balcony in bouncy metal patio chairs, an immaterial breeze grazing through the hair on their hot

scalps. The duo rested their arms on the railing, looking out on the pool area. Peter was vaguely thinking about friends and family, how people sailed in and out of your life, and he found himself wondering if Mike's family would come to the championships.

"Do you think your dad and Doug will come to the game?"

"Not sure. Maybe."

"Do you see your mom much?" Peter asked.

"Nope."

A girl about their age lounged at the poolside. She was brown, slim and pretty. They took turns using Mike's binoculars to watch her diving into the pool, and swimming through the guys playing Marco Polo.

"She looks interesting. I think I'll go down and say 'hi'," Mike announced.

"Where would that lead?" Peter asked. "We're here to win the championship and you're pitching tomorrow. We don't need any distractions."

"Geez, Chum, I'm just trying to relax and enjoy myself a little. My dad's been pressuring me for the past month to join this stupid youth movement. I finally get away from Williamsport, only to find the weirdos are here at the Holiday Inn in Wilkes-Barre, and Jo's their biggest recruiter," Mike said. "Maddie was dead on when she said they'd probably try to recruit and elevate Jo. Doesn't this crap ever stop? They're everywhere."

Mike took off his sunglasses, fuming as he stared out over the pool. All the fun and joy Peter had seen in Mike's face the past two days drained out in a single moment. Peter felt like a heavy wet blanket.

"I'm sorry. You're right. Have some fun, you deserve it."

"Right. Thanks," Mike said sarcastically. "You have it so easy with girls. You're so casual you didn't even bother sticking around to talk to Jo."

"I left because she and I broke up. I don't know how she feels about me right now."

"For real? I thought you guys were an item."

"We were, but I was insanely jealous. The break-up was all my fault."

"Wow," Mike said, his eyes drifting to the light blue horizon. "That's too bad."

Peter took up the binoculars, scouting the area surrounding the hotel for something to do.

"Why don't we go to the road construction site and look around? We have an hour before dinner."

"Okay, let's get going," Mike agreed, stooping to pick up a cricket for study as they left the balcony. He released his captive as they walked through the parking lot. "The Chinese say crickets are good luck. It'll be a good day."

They set off across the business highway to the construction site. The huge earth-moving machines sat motionless on the wide dirt roadway. They tried running straight up the grade, but slid back down after ten feet of

gain. Recognizing that any further efforts of the kind would fail, they found footing to the side of the smooth grade, and climbed easily to the top in a few minutes. Surveying their surroundings, they felt like masters of the city. Peter pulled a long sheet of cardboard from beneath a pile of heavy dirt clods and loose sand.

"Look-ee here," he said, holding the shredded cardboard sled up with both hands. "Someone left a toboggan, but it's about done for."

"The wind's starting to pick up," Mike noted. He shaded his eyes against the afternoon light to study a black Cadillac turning off the paved highway into the construction area. The car stopped and two black specks stepped out of the rear doors, pointing up at Peter and Mike.

"I hope that's not who I think it is," Mike said, lifting his binoculars to study the distant men. After a moment, he handed down his judgment. "It's Whitson with those damn Nephilim."

The specks climbed into a massive road grader, and it roared to life. The heavy monster chugged up a flattened incline towards them. The black car began slowly winding its way through the parked machinery below, heading in their direction.

"They're trying to pinch us off," Mike said, starting to ease down the lumpy ground at the side of the smooth grade. "We gotta get out of here."

Peter slid the long sheet of cardboard to the rim of the

inclined ramp, sitting down on it and curling the leading edge up in front of him.

"Why are you taking the slow road?" he asked. "I'll drive, push me off and jump in behind. Pull your legs in once we get going."

Mike scrambled back up the hill, and shoved Peter's back with all his might to send him tilting over the precipice, just as he jumped in behind. Whooping and cheering they plunged swiftly down the compacted surface.

"Holy crap!" Mike shouted above the roar of the rasping, grinding slide. Dirt poured off the sides in a spray so sharp that it would have sandblasted pitted metal shiny as a new nickel. "Whoo-ee!"

The accelerating toboggan zipped down the incline and Mike pulled himself in closer, to hear Peter's shouts over the speeding cardboard's zipping rustle.

"Don't let your knuckles touch the sand or they'll be gone!"

A slight bounce wobbled their center of gravity, and the toboggan tilted sideways, coming perilously close to flipping. Leaning dangerously against the force of the slide, they miraculously righted themselves. The soaring craft came in hot and went airborne across the rough transition area between the embankment and the roadway.

The black Cadillac pulled up in a cloud of dust about twenty yards away, loose dirt covering it from fender to fender. Mike ditched and ran, laughing hilariously.

"Run for it!" he yelled.

Peter tossed the cardboard, snorting with laughter at Mike running like a wild man.

"Come back here or your coaches will hear about this," Mr. Whitson yelled, "and your parents!"

"Shove it, Whitson!" Mike jeered, and he pulled up long enough to pick up a dirt clod and peg Whitson before running on. They stopped running when they reached the high grass.

"That was fantastic," Mike chortled. "Did you see Whitson twist and double-over when I nailed him with that dirt clod?"

"Do you think Whitson will really tell the coaches?"

"Whitson's a bag of hot air mixed with donkey-doo," Mike declared. "He won't say jack."

Entering the lobby, they found their teammates waiting to go to dinner. The coaches eyed Mike and Peter's dusty clothes suspiciously.

"We went to find an afternoon paper," Mike informed them. "I found a cricket. It's my lucky day."

At dinner, Mike ordered two burgers, fries, a strawberry malted and pecan pie. Peter substituted three hot dogs for the burgers and a chocolate malted for the strawberry. They ate slowly while reading the Wilkes-Barre paper.

"There's an article about tomorrow's game in the sports pages. The writer calls us 'a battery!'" Mike held up the paper and read aloud, for Peter's benefit. "Bantam League

fans expect the Williamsport battery of pitcher Mike DeSorcier and catcher Peter Miller to display an arsenal of pitching power in the Pennsylvania State Championship."

"Let me see that," Peter ordered, and Mike handed over the paper. Scanning the major league box scores, Peter noticed a headline article about Commissioner Scott. "Look at this! Blackthorne is trying to blame Mr. Scott for the town hall fire."

Mike grabbed the paper and read the article.

Bantam League Commissioner Scott Under Pressure to Step Down

The Bantam League issued a statement in answer to a complaint brought by a member of its Board of Directors, Mr. Dirkson Blackthorne of Blackthorne-Triangle Capital. The complaint alleges that Mr. Clancy Scott, Bantam League Commissioner, endangered the lives of children and families on July 4, 1956 and is also responsible for the town hall fire in late May of this year. Both incidents involved fireworks.

"We deeply grieve bringing this action," stated Mr. Blackthorne. "However, the lives and safety of Williamsport's citizens are our deepest concern. We fully investigated the

similarities of the firework vandalism at the Williamsport Town Hall and at the Williamsport Market Street Bridge. We regretfully concluded Commissioner Scott is a deeply troubled man with a mental disorder termed 'Pyromania'. We will continue to investigate the suspicious blast at our facilities near Skytop, which has similarities to these two incidents. We sincerely hope Mr. Scott will voluntarily step down as Commissioner of Bantam League Baseball and get the medical help needed to cure his condition."

"I want to keep the first article for my scrapbook, but that one is garbage," Mike exploded, folding the paper and putting it in his back pocket. "Your dad is probably Commissioner Scott's best shot at proving his innocence. We'll show it to him when we get home."

The following morning Mike and Peter sat in the rear of the bus while their teammates filed in and Coach Lundsford counted heads. At the ballpark, the Millionaires discovered their friends and families were already there. Karen and Jo waited behind the families during the surprise greetings. Mike showed Mr. Miller the newspaper article.

"A battery, huh?" Mr. Miller repeated with amusement. "Don't let your heads swell up."

"There's another article, about Mr. Scott. We thought you

should read it."

Mr. Miller's nose scrunched and his hand visibly tightened on the newspaper as he read. He returned the paper to Mike, repositioning his glasses.

"A classic smear campaign," Mr. Miller said, "chock-full of slander and libel. Clancy can fight and win this in court, but winning over public opinion is another matter. The Bantam League is very shy of bad publicity, and people believe what they read in the papers and hear on the news. He'll be under a lot of social pressure to give in and resign."

"Tell Mr. Scott what you just told us," Peter said. "Convince him to stick it out. He didn't do any of it."

"You guys concentrate on the game. I warned Clancy it would be a dirty fight, and I have faith he'll stick it out."

Mr. Miller patted them on the back and joined the rest of his family in the bleachers. Peter glanced over to where Jo stood alone in the sun, and Karen whispered in his ear.

"I think you should talk with her."

"I don't know about that," Peter frowned. "What else is there to say?"

"You'll think of something," Karen insisted. "Mike, buy me a sno-cone."

Karen seized Mike's hand, tugging him to the concession stand, leaving Peter to trudge slowly towards Jo. When Jo saw him approaching, she turned away, adjusting her sunglasses.

"Can you do me a favor?" Peter asked.

"What is it?" Jo asked, folding her arms across her chest, and fixing her eyes on the ball field activity.

"Can you feed these straps through the buckles and cinch my chest protector?"

"Sure, turn around," Jo ordered, and Peter turned his back on her.

"It was a shock to see you in the lobby yesterday," Peter said.

"I wondered why you didn't come over and say 'hi'. It would have been considerate. I'm not following you around, I promise," Jo said. "I didn't know we were coming here until yesterday morning. The Blackthorne Youth is actually kind of fun. I'm meeting lots of new friends."

"Jo, you don't belong with those people. It's a bad group and they're up to no good, trust me."

Jo yanked Peter's chest strap tight with a forceful tug.

"Trust you? Is that what I should do, Peter? Whom do you think I should hang out with? Earlier this summer I thought I had a swell set of friends, and a terrific guy for a steady. Boy was I ever wrong! I finally figured out it's time for new friends!"

Peter turned to face Jo.

"Friends like Deck and Conrad? You can have them."

The jewel at Jo's neck glowed hotly. Her cheeks flushed with fury, red splotches breaking out on her bare arms.

"Oh! You're such riffraff!!" Jo fired back. "You're the worst sort of guy imaginable! I would trust Deck or Conrad

over you any day! At least I know they wouldn't drop me like a rock at the first sign that I might be '*a problem*,'" she mimicked Peter sarcastically, holding up her fingers for air quotes, wiggling them like rabbit's ears.

"I must have been out of my mind to think you cared about me, and that I was safe with you! I hate you, Peter Miller!" Jo's caustic words splashed Peter like acid, and with no reply he walked away. He was near the dugout when her distressed voice roused him a second time. "Fine. Walk away, coward!"

Jo's '*coward*' slipped like a blade between Peter's shoulders and he stopped dead in his tracks, blood draining from his sorrowed heart into his pained chest. His arms and legs became weak and heavy, as his mind spun furiously in the deepening sand of his sadness, or was it anger he was feeling? He didn't know which it was, but he found himself wanting to hurt something or somebody, and there was nothing to hit. Feeling *something* allowed the blood to return to his drained limbs. He pumped his fists several times into empty air, before grabbing his chest protector, wrestling it off and flinging it to the dirt. It wasn't enough. His teammates clung to the dugout fence to witness his fit.

Peter kicked off his shin guards and whirled them into the trees. He stared furiously at Jo standing alone twenty yards away, watching his outburst. The frozen look of shock on her face made him realize that his roundhouse swings and kicks were terrifying her. In that moment of considering

Jo's vulnerable frame, Peter suddenly recalled his recent dream of standing safely on the shore, while Jo and Mr. Scott fought stormy seas in a struggling lifeboat. He became aware of his family and friends watching him with awed concern, and he stopped kicking and swinging. Composing himself, Peter jogged to where Jo stood, but she pushed him and hit his shoulders with her clenched fists to keep him away. He ignored her righteous blows, seizing and holding her arms until they went weak and dropped. He pulled her shaking body to his.

"You're right, Jo," he said softly in her ear. "I've been a lousy friend, and I'm sorry for that, but I'd be a lousier friend if I didn't tell you that Whitson and Deck and Conrad are using you as bait, to attract others into the Blackthorne Youth. You owe it to yourself to find out the truth about this necklace, and the Blackthorne Youth."

"This necklace is from my father. My mother wouldn't lie to me about that."

"I didn't say she lied to you. Maybe she doesn't know the truth. But Whitson's a liar, and you do know that. Think about it and we'll talk some more later, if you want."

"I'll always be your friend. I've got to get ready for the game, and it'll take me a good bit of time, now that I've torn off all my equipment and thrown it into the trees."

"I'll help you find it," Jo laughed-sniffled, and she and Peter gathered his scattered equipment from the brush and trees.

"I don't hate you, you know," Jo apologized, handing Peter a shin guard.

"I know."

Peter made his way back to the dugout. Mike met him halfway, holding out his chest protector to him.

"Everything okay? What was going on?"

"Jo and I had it out. We both said some mean things, but we'll be okay."

Mike was awesome on the mound in the first inning, striking out all three batters. His breaking balls were crisp, his change-ups elusive and his fastballs thundered into Peter's mitt.

"Great stuff," Peter said. "Keep it up and we're going to the Series."

In the bottom of the first Peter came to the plate with two outs. He noticed the pitcher shortened his stride on his change-up, and he was ready and waiting when it came. He walloped the pitch over the center field fence for a two-run homer.

The decisive first inning discouraged the Homer City Wildcats. Mike racked up twelve strikeouts, and the game was over in an hour and fifteen minutes. The final score was Millionaires 4, Wildcats 0.

"There was no beating you today," Peter said. "Keep it up and we could win the World Series."

The coaches and fathers pitched in for pizza, chicken and sides to eat at the Kirby Park picnic tables. Jo smiled at Peter

across a long buffet table as they filled their plates.

"May I have a straw, please?" Jo asked, with a nasal giggle. Peter looked up and saw that she already had one, up her nose.

"Gosh, you're so juvenile!" Peter laughed, spooning slaw on her plate. "Will you ever grow up?"

After lunch the four teens took a walk to the park lake, feeding crusts to a band of marauding ducks. When the crusts were all gone, the ducks left, paddling aimlessly through the water. Families lay nearby on blankets, music from their radios drifting through the pleasant air. Calls and cries from the picnic area undulated through the tall trees. Mike and Jo got up to stroll around the lake, watching young couples row across its mirrored surface in small rental boats.

"The luck from my cricket day is almost over," Mike said wistfully. "I wish it would last for a thousand years, because I'm in My Blue Heaven right now."

"Sometimes you're so sweet, Mike," Jo said, taking his hand as they continued on the path around the lake. "You're hard to resist."

19

*T*HE *C*ARNIES

LOOKING DUBIOUSLY AT THE WOODEN floor, Mr. Croft held his circular saw in hand. "You're sure this is where you want it, Mike? You know the rule - think twice, cut once."

"Yeah, I'm sure. We'll place the altar over the floor panel during the trick, and then remove it from beneath the stage. That's Chum's job."

Mike looked over to where Peter was parked on an upturned crate, drinking an orange pop from the cooler. It was a hot day and curious kids from the Brandon Park neighborhood wandered around the stage construction. An ice cream truck's ringing bell had them dashing off to beg dimes for a fudge bar. In Mike's opinion, Peter spent a lot of time at the cooler.

"Did you get that, Chum?"

"Check and double-check. I'm the troll under the stage, waiting for when the guys carry Jo to the altar. I remove the panel. I put the shaft in the hidden drive plate of the sarcophagus. When I hear your signal, I turn the crank,

flipping the mannequin topside. Jo rotates to me, while you open the lid to light the mannequin on fire. When I get your second signal, I turn Jo back up. If any flames drip down, I put them out with the fire extinguisher. Jo rises from the dead on stage. The audience cheers. Got it."

"Mental preparation is important. You've gotta see the entire act in your mind just the way it's going to go, or something will be left out, or go wrong."

"The troll under the stage will hold up his end," Peter growled. "You just worry about what's happening up on stage."

Mike strolled over to where Jo and Janice were planted among a group of volunteers from the Community Theater, painting a canvas backdrop with Egyptian motifs. At Mrs. Croft's suggestion, the theater group decided to perform Thornton Wilder's *'Our Town'* in the early evening, before the magic show. Along with helping build the stage and advertise the festival, the theater group loaned their stage curtains. Mike knelt beside Jo as she painted the sand-colored arms of Isis.

"How's it going?"

"The statues of Horus and Ra are drying," Jo reported. "This backdrop is a big project, but I think we have enough help. The shell for the sarcophagus is drying. I miss Karen's help. She's at the Community Center, helping with the *'Our Town'* play and talent show. I hate complaining, but I'm worn out. I still have my Blackthorne Youth duties. Maybe

you guys are right about this necklace. When I wear it, I always feel these annoying chilly sensations build up, but never release. They feel kinda good, tingly, but it's like I don't have any control over my own body."

"Let me take the necklace," Mike suggested. "You'll feel better."

"Mike, I'll take it off when I decide to," Jo said irritably. "Don't worry about your show. Everything will magically come together, it always does. It's the theater, remember?"

"I'm glad you're so confident, but give me a paint brush anyway. I can help for a while and so can Chum. Hey, cooler troll, come get a brush and help out."

Peter appeared beside Mike and Jo, looking over their shoulders.

"Give me some black paint," he demanded. "I want to see things painted black."

"Let him paint the hair black on Isis and Ra," Jo suggested. "He's in one of his dark moods."

Mike cracked his overseer's whip, and another week of intense labor passed. His stage was almost set, when the sarcophagus and altar were complete. The statues of Horus and Ra ruled majestically at the back corners. The four Anubis costumes were complete, except for the one mask Peter accidentally crushed, while moving a crate. He'd watched helplessly as a saddened Jo picked up the flattened mask, without a word, to begin immediate repairs. She brightened when the assembled stage crew 'oohed' and

'ahhed' as she modeled the finished Egyptian princess costume.

"Move the sarcophagus from its mark using the wooden rods," Mike's megaphone bellowed. "Square it on the altar when you reach the third step. Work together. Walk slowly and deliberately, with reverence, as if you really were in a temple. Don't rush through the ceremony."

Poppie and Jeremy deserted the magic show, when told that they would have leading parts in a competing initiation ceremony for the Blackthorne Youth. Canvas banners ten feet high, displaying Blackthorne's red-and-gold phoenix, billowed and flapped in the early evening winds. Brandon Park resembled a great ship about to set sail. Mike scoffed at his festival competition.

"They're nowhere near the parking lot," he pointed out. "No one can see them marching behind the trees. I hope their ceremony falls flat on its face."

Mike recruited his Millionaire teammates Tuck Carson and Dan Staylor, replacing the two deserters, to join Tom Major and 'Rocket' Hocker as the costumed servants of Anubis. They carried the empty sarcophagus up the altar steps, placing it on a slab painted to look like glossy marble. The slab was actually made of wood and cardboard with an easily removed panel. Heavy black material cloaked Peter's darkened 'troll' area beneath the stage, where he wore a coal miner's hat to provide light. Mike vacated his director's chair, to kneel on the stage and peer into the darkness

beneath.

"Any trouble connecting the shaft to the drive plate?" he asked Peter. "My on-stage theatrics will only give you about a minute to crank Jo over. I don't want to open the lid and see Jo staring at me."

"No problems, the shaft slides in pretty easy."

"Make sure you push the cotter pins through the holes to hold it in place."

"I won't forget. How could I? You've only reminded me about a dozen times. We won't know how well it all works until we can put a real person inside, and turn the assembly."

"We'll do a full dress rehearsal this Tuesday, before the teams from out-of-state start arriving for the Series. Once the first game is over I can focus on fine-tuning things for the show. I pitch Thursday but then I won't pitch again until Sunday, in the championship game. This show and the lunar eclipse will be over Saturday night."

"These are the best teams in the country. Don't get too cocky about being in the Sunday game."

"It's destiny, we'll be in the championship game. So let it be written, so let it be done."

The midway caravan rolled into town Tuesday afternoon, and set up in the west parking lot. Cars drove through the park to see the wheels of light spinning in the evening sky, circling the loop near Mike's stage, which waited eighty yards from the midway. A small but enthusiastic crowd of friends and family applauded the

magic show and '*Our Town*' rehearsals.

"Too bad we had to do the lighting of the princess in pantomime," Mike said to Peter. "In theory everything should go fine."

Peter wandered the midway's mostly empty booths, rides and sideshows with Janice and Oso that Wednesday afternoon.

"Oso doesn't look like a Frankenstein dog anymore," Peter complimented Janice, "no more tubes, stitches, or bald spots. You've done a good job caring for him."

A handful of carnies occupied themselves putting stuffed animals on display in their game booths, and Janice stopped to watch one man stock his shelves. A particularly large purple elephant entranced her.

"I see the little girl likes my plush," the booth operator said. "We don't spring till tonight, but why don't you come back on the lot when I'm open and give it a shot? A strong guy like you must have a great arm."

"I'd like to win that big purple elephant," Janice declared. "Do you think you could win him, Peter? It looks easy to knock over those bottles, and you're good at throwing baseballs."

"I can try, but carnival games aren't always as easy as they look."

"I tell you what, Larry," the carney said. "I'll let you throw for free tonight, if you earn a Key to the Midway, and bring it to me."

"What's a Key to the Midway?"

"You do favors for the carnival people and you earn the Key to the Midway. It lets you play any game you want, or ride any ride, free."

"Who has a key? The owner?"

"Nah, no need to bother him. Ask those guys sitting around in the BoneYard over there, playing cards."

Peter approached a group of grizzled carnies sitting on overturned crates. The men wore dirty white sleeveless t-shirts, displaying large tattoos on their upper arms. The group was involved in an intense session of complaining.

"So, the tall guy, the one smoking through a hole in his throat, he gives the Boss three hundred bucks an' says, 'The Wheel MUST be sixty-three feet tall, exactly'. Criminy! We spent the entire day building a new foundation and jacking the Wheel up, all for three lousy feet. Geez-us!" The man speaking turned to Peter and spat. Peter noticed dried baked beans on his t-shirt.

"The guy over there," Peter pointed to the carney at the bottle toss booth, "told me to ask any of you for a Key to the Midway."

A second carney in a black bowler hat looked Peter up and down keenly.

"That Hammer-Squash in the stick joint over there told you to ask us for a Key to the Midway? We don't just give those away, and a smart Larry like you ought to know that. I tell you what, though, I left my underwater lighter at the

last jump in Harrisburg. If you can score me one of those at the hardware store, I'll give you my Key to the Midway to use tonight. You'll get the scratch for the lighter."

"Thanks, I'll see if I can find one."

"Cop it for me, Mooch. I'll make sure you get some cotton-candy from the sugar shack."

Peter left the midway lot, wandering down Middle Drive towards the stage. He spotted Karen sweeping and tidying up the area.

"Hi, Karen," Janice said. "Look, we're taking Oso out for his first walk."

With the help of her long push broom, Karen vaulted down from the stage edge. She rubbed Oso's nose with her own.

"His nose is wet," Karen said. "He's feeling better."

"The stage looks great. How's everything coming along?"

"On schedule. I'm setting up a booth for four hours every day, the rest of this week, to audition anyone who wants to try out for the variety show. We have a dozen local acts so far, and some World Series visitors may want to enter. I'd like to have at least twenty entries."

"Mike and I are visiting the midway tonight, do you wanna come? If I can find an underwater lighter I can trade it for a Key to the Midway and ride for free."

"What's an underwater lighter? I don't think there's any such thing. Water puts out fire."

"That's what the carney said, an underwater lighter. Anyway, I'm going to ask around. I wonder if Jo will feel like coming out tonight."

"She's been staying up late working. My grandfather says the Nephilim spirits are loitering around her stone, along with scores of other spirits. I think it's getting to her. At the very least she needs the protection of a tattoo on her shoulder."

"A tattoo? Girls don't get tattoos."

"I've had one since I was five. In the fishing village where I grew up, all the women have tattoos. It proves we're strong and able to endure pain."

"Is that so?" Peter reassessed Karen for about the fortieth time. She was full of surprises. "Well, maybe Jo would go for a nifty star tattoo or something like it. At any rate, we'll get her out tonight and cut loose."

"Peter stays up late at night, too," Janice tattled. "He likes scary movies and comics, and I don't."

"Your brother isn't always wise like you, Janice, but he's a good brother. You need to take care of him and make him listen to you, when he's being foolish."

"I will. He's going to start listening to me. Most of the time he just ignores me."

"I do not, you little monster."

"Do so."

Peter and Janice said good-bye to Karen, continuing their battle of wills on the way home.

Mike and Peter attended a five o'clock team meeting at Memorial Field, and Coach Lundsford addressed the team in front of home plate.

"I'm proud of all of you. Thousands of people have come to Williamsport to see you play in the Bantam League World Series. There'll be reporters here from CBS, ABC and Sports Illustrated. The reporters might pull you aside, to ask your opinions about trouble between the directors in our league. You don't have any thoughts or opinions. Clear?"

Coach Lundsford scanned the teens for any hints of thoughts or opinions. Peter churned with emotion, but he did not feel safe speaking up. He kept his eyes expressionless and flat. Satisfied with the lack of any feeling response, Coach Lundsford nodded his head and moved on.

"If you meet any of the other teams around town, I want you to shake hands and say hello, be friendly. They're just like you. They love baseball."

"Mike, you're pitching Thursday against Rochester, New York in the early game. We won't know who we play in the second round until Friday evening. Tuck, I'm giving you the start in the second game on Saturday. Wally, you're my long reliever if either Mike or Tuck gets in trouble. Make sure your uniforms are clean, and get some rest tonight. See you here tomorrow at O-nine hundred hours, sharp."

Poppie and Jeremy ran off shouting with excitement, while Peter left the field with Mike.

"Do you know where I can get an underwater lighter? I figure if anyone would know it'd be you."

"I've never heard of such a thing. I don't think it's possible, unless it's an acetylene torch."

"That's what the guy wants. I guess I'll ask at the hardware store. Why don't you drop by my house, before heading over to the midway?"

"Okay, see you at seven. I hope some of the out-of-state teams decide to head over. The park is practically next door to the college dorms, where they're staying. They can't miss finding the Key to the Midway."

"What did you say?"

"The Ferris Wheel, Mr. Croft calls it the Key to the Midway. It's the first thing people see from a distance and it brings them to the midway."

Peter went silent. His eyes darkened and glowered. The carnies had fooled him and he wanted revenge. Now he really wanted to snag the big purple elephant from the carney, for Janice.

Mrs. Miller stayed home from the carnival that evening, insisting she did not care for the sugar, spinning rides and carnival people. Peter drove the Bel Air to Karen's at seven to pick her up. Ataninnuaq agreed to come along at the party's urging, and he sat up front with Peter and Mr. Miller. They picked up Jo, and she sat in the wide backseat with Karen, Mike and Janice.

"Keep your hands and arms in the rides at all times,"

Mike warned. "There's a bazillion stories of arms and legs being lopped off, and heads crushed, at these little fairs."

"You're just trying to scare us," Karen laughed. "My dad says this is a good outfit, with a great safety record."

"Your dad told me the same thing today, when they were hooking up the power for the stage to their generator, but you won't find me riding on anything held together with baling wire and bubble gum. Take a hard look at the guys who set the rides up. They're pretty scary, and they do it all in a single day."

"I want to drive the bumper cars," Janice said, "and I want an elephant ear and a lemon shake-up."

The little midway twinkled with lights and gaudy colors, parked cars lining its perimeter. Girls and guys dressed to impress each other, hoping to meet someone familiar, and someone mysterious and new. A breeze carried perfume scents, mixed with smells of popcorn and fried pastry, through a maze of alleys and game joints. A huge yellow generator named Genny powered the fair from a central spot near the Scrambler. Genny's muscular black tentacles slithered to the outskirts of the lot.

"There sure are a lot of people here," Karen said. "The most I've ever seen in one place."

"I see Emily from school," Janice said. "She's with her family."

"Some of the guys here are on the other teams," Mike observed. "Let's walk around and see if we can meet

anybody."

"Meet me at the Ferris Wheel if you need anything," Mr. Miller offered. "I'll try to stay near there."

The teens split off to themselves, and a barker gave his call to Mike as they passed.

"See this here, mac? It's a hair from the bearded lady inside, really! There's a lot more where this came from, see for yourself. See the Mer-Woman. Bring your girls in with you."

"I don't want to visit any sideshows," Jo said. "You guys can go in by yourselves, if you feel you must."

"Lobster Boy looks pretty cool," Peter said, "but I'm not paying fifty cents to see him."

Strolling on, Peter spotted the deceiving carney, running the milk bottle toss. The carney stopped the foursome and addressed Peter personally.

"Hey, Larry, you're back. Did you get the Key to the Midway? Take two tosses for thirty cents, knock all three bottles down in one throw, and get a prize. Demonstrate your muscular strength to the girls and win them a plush."

Peter dug through the change in his pockets, handing the man a quarter and a nickel. The carney pulled two baseballs from his apron.

"Here you go, Larry, knock 'em down."

A small crowd of on-lookers gathered to watch Peter's throws. Peter threw hard at the bottom of the top bottle where it stood on the other two bottles. He hit the spot

squarely and the top bottle flew off. The bottom bottles wobbled, but remained upright.

"Janice really wants me to win that purple elephant for her."

"It's a rigged game," Mike said. "That was a good toss."

"Say, watch your language, Mooch," the carney warned.

"I don't burn the lot here. We plan on coming back every year. My game isn't a gaff, and my prizes aren't slum. Your friend's got another ball."

His brief argument with Mike drew a bigger audience, and the carney repositioned the bottles. Peter aimed for the same spot, repeating the same result.

"That's the best I can do. Those bottles are impossible to knock down. They're weighted or something."

"Let me try," a quiet voice said.

A smallish wiry young man stepped from the crowd. His red baseball cap said 'Roswell' on the front in gold letters, and his thin wrists stuck out beyond the long sleeves of his baseball shirt. His arms were without hair and the hair visible beneath his cap was light and feathery. His skin was pale and his eyes were large and dark. Peter thought the guy was altogether peculiar in movement and appearance. He slid thirty cents to the carney, who passed him two balls across the counter. When the stranger stretched his fingers out to pick up the first ball, it was evident he had only three thin fingers and an abbreviated thumb.

"You look like you've been with it," the carney said

"When you're done here you should go see the sideshow manager and ask for a job."

"I will take your suggestion under advisement. Move aside, please."

The thin stranger pulled his arm back in a pitcher's motion, and hurled a meteor that blew the stacked bottles off the table.

"I believe I won a plush animal. I will take the large purple one on top, for my friend here."

"You're a sharpie, I can tell. You win a plush, but not that one. You have to knock down the bottles another five times in a row, to win that one."

"This game is a cheat," Mike said. "Come on, he's just trying to draw you in and take all your money."

The Roswell boy looked at Peter with his large eyes.

"I don't have the money for that many throws, but I can do it. Purchase the chances, and I'll win the purple animal for you."

Peter pulled out sixty cents in change, pushing it across the counter to the carney.

"Here, this will cover four more balls. He still has one to go this round."

The Roswell boy smiled at Peter. His teeth were small and sharp, like the teeth of a possum. He took up his next ball and lobbed it with an easy motion, scattering the bottles a second time. A large and interested crowd began forming to watch the contest. The carney looked around uneasily,

handing out another two balls and resetting the bottles.

"Hey, Rube!" the carney called out to no one in particular. The Roswell player continued his uncanny accuracy, putting bottles to flight with each new toss.

"Way to knock 'em down, Grease," his teammates shouted.

Other carnies gathered in and among the crowd, witnessing the boy knock the bottles down a sixth and last time.

"The purple one, please."

The carney handed down his beloved flash, the calling card to his booth.

"You're an outlaw from my booth," the carney said to Grease. "The other Splinter Heads know you now. Take the plush and don't come back, you or your friends. I know a sharpie when I see one. There's something not right about you, Buster."

Grease handed Peter the out-sized trophy.

"The center of gravity was not in the middle of the bottles as you believed. In that configuration, gravity's center was low on the pyramid. We'll see each other again, another time."

Grease waved and left with his teammates.

"What in the world," Jo said. "He was a mite strange."

"He sure was," Peter agreed, "but he won this purple elephant for Janice. It's as big as she is."

The quartet held hands, winding through the crowd like

a snake, Mike leading with a cocky strut.

"Ooo, the Tunnel of Lo-oo-ve," he crooned, as they stopped in front of the sign. Couples floated serenely around the bends of a lazy river, behind the bars of a high steel fence. A large red mouth at the tunnel entrance swallowed the boaters, as they disappeared from ogling eyes into the private darkness.

"Do you guys want to ride?" Jo asked. "It's two to a boat, who would ride together?"

"Let's make it interesting," Mike said, as he fiddled with the handle of a wooden arcade machine, set at the bottom of the ride's gangplank. "This Love-Meter is only a penny and we'll take turns squeezing the handle. Only the winning couple rides. The other couple sits out."

"Who goes first?" Karen asked.

"You and I'll go. Lace your fingers in with mine and we'll squeeze together."

Mike and Karen interlocked their fingers around the grip.

"Ready? I'm dropping the penny in..."

They pulled the handle's metal clappers together, and a thermometer lit up, rising behind the machine's glass: "Flirtatious" was its declaration.

"Hmm. Flirtatious, not bad," Mike said. "Now you and me, Jo."

Jo skipped forward, locking hands with Mike to pull, and Peter dropped a penny in the slot: "Furious."

"Furious. Wow, a step above Flirtatious. Hubba-hubba!"

Now you and Jo, Chum."

Peter and Jo joined hands, and the verdict read "Lovable."

"How sweet," Mike gushed. "But not much to brag on. Karen? You're up with Chum."

Karen's cheeks flushed, and she hoped Peter wouldn't notice her sweaty palm. She wiped it on her dress before joining hands. As they clasped hands he stared at her intently. Mike slid another penny in. The decree: "Bashful."

"Jo and I have the highest score," Mike announced. "We ride."

Mike and Jo clattered up the wood incline to their swan boat, stepped in and floated off into the mouth of the cave. Peter and Karen stood side-by-side, waiting while the current of foot traffic eddied around them. Karen dropped her eyes and Peter shuffled his feet.

"We'll ride together on the next ride," Peter said. "Water's dangerous for you before summer's end anyway, remember?"

"Say, you're right," Karen laughed. "I think the Love-Meter just saved my life."

The Love Tunnel disgorged the winning pair back into the open canal. Jo pulled a mirror compact from her purse, dabbing at her lips while Mike paddled the water with his hand. They disembarked hand in hand, trotting down the planks with glowing smiles.

"It was dripping wet and hot in there," Mike informed

everybody, looking around with a pleased expression on his face. "Wasn't it, Jo?"

"Yes, it was," Jo giggled, "and dark!"

Jo couldn't prevent her nervous laughter from escaping, and soon she was laughing uncontrollably.

"You guys go on," Mike said. "I'll stay with her until she gets herself together again."

Karen and Peter sauntered to the FunHouse in the next lot. Peter glanced over to see Mike joining Jo's laughter as he held her skirt at the hem and fanned the air with his hand. The slow line to the FunHouse stretched like an accordion in front of the fences.

"I wish we could go inside the FunHouse," Karen said sadly, "but the line's a mile long."

"Maybe you'll get your wish later, when there aren't so many people around," Peter said. "Let's ride the Scrambler; its line isn't as long."

Mike and Jo regained their composure and joined the line for the Scrambler. Peter stared at the bright yellow lights of a food cart serving popcorn. He watched the concessionaire dole out white and red striped popcorn bags to waiting customers. Imagining the drizzled butter and salt on the delicate puffs of white, his mouth ignited and salivated. He was about to leave the line for a bag of popcorn, when the group's turn came up.

The ride jockey ushered Karen and Peter into one bucket, and Mike and Jo into another. They waved to each other and

made silly faces while the jockey locked in other pairs for the ride. The buckets lurched off in wide lazy turns, picking up speed, until sudden jerks on the pivot arms shifted the buckets in unexpected directions, pulling the riders like taffy across the lot. The force of the turns crushed the howling pairs into each other on the dizzying spins; they screamed, shrieked and yelled. The crowd outside the protective fence blurred into a run of colors, for a long twisting minute, before the ride slowly, evenly, decelerated, the long arms swinging heavily to a final lumbering stop. Laughing, they exited the ride and Peter raced back around to the entrance, to retrieve the plush purple elephant for Janice.

"I need to find my dad, and stuff this monster in the trunk of the Bel Air. I don't want to carry it around all night."

"We'll take turns with it," Karen offered. "I want to carry him around for a while."

Peter gladly unloaded the elephant on Karen to lug around.

"I'm dizzy from that ride," Jo said. "I'm feeling sick to my stomach."

"Oh-oh," Mike warned. "Barf-O-Rama."

"Stop it, Mike. Don't say that. I really feel ill. I have to sit down for a little while."

Peter cast his eyes around the lot, looking for a place where Jo could sit down. At the far reaches of the pea gravel he spotted Blackthorne and his dark entourage, gathered in

a bunch, just beyond the midway lights. Peter pursed his lips and his eyes narrowed.

"I think we need to get you home, Jo. I don't think you're going to feel any better as long as you stay here. I'll find my dad."

"Darn," Mike exclaimed. "I was just starting to have fun."

"I'm sorry," Jo apologized. "I don't mean to be a party-pooper. I knew I shouldn't have come."

"It's all right," Mike said. "If you weren't here it wouldn't be the same. I want you to feel better is all. We're in the early game tomorrow anyway, and it's probably not a great idea to stay up late, eating garbage and spinning in circles. Maybe we can come back tomorrow night."

Karen approached a slouching ride jockey, to borrow his stool for Jo to sit on. The young carney looked over at Jo in her summer clothes, and immediately carried his stool over to her. Jo thanked him several times and the jockey returned to his post, smiling broadly, with his shoulders back and his head high. Peter left Mike and Karen with Jo, to wind his way to the Ferris Wheel. He finally found his dad and Ataninnuaq among the crowd looking up at the wheel.

"Hey, Chum," Mr. Miller greeted, "how's it going? This is Janice's third time up on the wheel. I don't think she'll ever get off."

"Karen is holding a big stuffed animal that I won for Janice. Do you think Janice would mind if we call it a night?"

Jo's feeling sick, and I think we need to take her home."

"Here's seventy cents. Go buy a lemon shake-up and an elephant ear for Janice. I think we can convince her. I'll wait for the ride to end, and let her know."

The plush elephant delighted Janice. She christened him 'Mr. Big', and he sat beside her in Mr. Miller's lap, while Peter drove the party home. Karen and Mike thumb-wrestled across Jo's lap in the backseat.

"There were eighteen buckets on the Ferris Wheel," Janice chattered in the middle seat. "Eighteen is a one and an eight. One plus eight is nine. I rode the wheel three times. The tall man said the Wheel was sixty-three feet high. Six plus three is nine. Eighteen divided by three is six. Three plus six is nine. I'm nine years old. Three, six and nine are special numbers. No matter how you add or subtract them they always come back to themselves. Why isn't anyone paying attention to the numbers?"

"That black car's been following us ever since we left the carnival," Mr. Miller observed, "and its headlights are off."

Everyone turned around to look out the back window. Sixty yards behind a black car duplicated their every turn.

"Chum," Ataninnuaq said, "please let me out at this corner. It is a nice night and I think I will walk home. Mr. Big can have my seat so that your father can see to help you drive."

Peter stopped at the next corner, and Ataninnuaq stepped out into the darkness, leaning back inside to say good night.

The phosphorescent glow of the instrument panel lit his face with a soft green fire.

"Thank you for the ride, Chum. Janice, help your father lift Mr. Big into the back so that he can have my seat all to himself," Ataninnuaq laughed. He turned to the back seat occupants. "Mike, rest up, and I will see you at the game tomorrow. Jo, take care of yourself and sleep in. Karen, I will see you at home, chimo."

Ataninnuaq closed the door firmly. Peter looked back as he rounded the corner in the Bel Air, and saw Ataninnuaq stepping out from the lamplight at the curb, into the middle of the street. Peter drove on. The leaves on the trees of Washington Boulevard blocked any further witness of Ataninnuaq's encounter with the trailing car.

"Jo, are you okay if we take Karen home first?" Peter asked. "It should only add a few minutes to your drive."

"I'm fine. I feel bad everyone had to leave early because of me."

"I think we all had fun, and the carnival is here the rest of the week. We'll go again."

Peter escorted Karen to her front door.

"I'll call you when we get home," Peter said. "You're coming to the game tomorrow, right?"

"No need to call, I'll be there," Karen clutched Peter's shirt collar, pulling herself forward to rub noses.

"Okay, see you tomorrow," he said.

Peter didn't explain that it was Ataninnuaq's safety

worrying him, not hers. At home, Peter carried Mr. Big up the stairs for Janice.

"Thank you for Mr. Big," Janice hugged Peter. "You're the best brother ever."

Peter went to his room and lay in his bunk, twirling the imprisoned Udjuk around and around with the fingers of his right hand. He thought about the evening, and about Ataninnuaq. The World Series would begin and end in the next four days. He pondered the swift flight of the sudden summer, with all its wild hopes and nameless fears. His thoughts entwined with the darkness and he fell deeply asleep.

In the early morning, as light cascaded into his room through the blinds, Peter dreamed he was bowling with Jo. She was wearing her pink shoes and polka dot dress, laying down perfect strikes, frame after frame after frame. Jo picked up her pink ball to bowl the tenth frame, and when she did, Peter noticed her eyes were not ocean-gray and emerald. They were dark brown and almond-shaped, and he studied her face carefully before realizing it was Karen who was his partner. Jo sat at the score table in Karen's tartan skirt, white blouse and her black-and-white saddle shoes, intent on the numbers. She was marking an '18' as his score in the tenth and final frame. Both girls smiled at him, and he woke up.

20

THE TOURNAMENT

“**J**IM, WE JUST CLOCKED DESORCIER at ninety-two miles an hour,” the ABC radio announcer, Howard Cosell exclaimed, leaning over his microphone. “His catcher is really brave to crouch behind the plate, and take that pounding, for six innings. His mitt hand will sting at the end of this game!”

“That’s number eight, Peter Miller, at catcher for the Millionaires,” Jim Nutley, his co-host, elaborated. “He’s batting .438 on the season with twelve home runs. He slammed a double to left to score two runners in the first inning for Williamsport. Those runs remain the only score here in the upper half of the sixth and last inning of Game One of the 1956 Bantam League Baseball World Series. Williamsport, Pennsylvania two; Rochester, New York goose egg.”

Peter called time-out to consult with Mike on the mound.

“How’s your arm?” Peter asked. “Still loose?”

“It feels good, two more strikeouts and I’ll have a Series record.”

"Save your arm a little. Two easy pitches might do the same job as ten or twelve hard ones. There's a good chance you'll be pitching again in three days."

"*Seventeen strikeouts: Mike DeSorcier sets a Series record.*' That's the headline I want to read tomorrow. My arm is fine. Thanks for visiting. I'll see you after the game."

Peter strolled back to home plate, realizing Mike's blood was on fire for strike-outs, and any reasonable caution was lost on him. Mike proceeded to throw nine hard pitches, overpowering the next batter, to record strikeout number sixteen.

"Hope you're happy, Showboat," Peter yelled.

"One to go," Mike smiled, giving a thumbs up.

Mike produced two quick strikes on the next batter and Peter called for a waste pitch. Mike shook it off. He wanted 'The Heater'. Peter insisted on a waste pitch a second, and then a third time. Mike continued shaking him off, until Peter shrugged his shoulders, secretly flipped Mike the bird, and pounded his glove. Mike broke out in laughter, bowing to his catcher's wisdom, and threw a high outside waste pitch that caught the frustrated batter chasing the bad ball, for his seventeenth strikeout of the game. The Millionaires had moved through to the semifinal round. An amused Mike jogged off the field, shaking hands with Peter at third base.

"I might not always go along with you," Mike said. "You're not always right, and I could have had him with The Heater, too."

"I made the right call for the situation. It's not all about you. You're a member of a team. Anyway, good game, and you got your record. Congratulations."

Their families waited behind the fences in front of the bleachers. Doug pounded Mike joyfully on the back, and his father hoisted him into the air in a bear hug at his waist. Peter's family greeted him with an ice-cold Dr. Pepper. He spotted Karen and her family standing up to stretch. Finding Ataninnuaq beside Karen relieved Peter's worry and he made his way to them, still in his catcher's gear.

"Great game, Chum," Mr. Croft said. "That was a nice double you hit in the first. It was the game winner."

"Thanks. Are you guys staying for the second game?"

"Karen and Ataninnuaq are staying, but I've got to get back to the garage. There are a lot of out-of-town people with car trouble. Karen's mother has a thousand things to do, to get ready for the show Saturday. You're not staying, are you, honey?"

"No, I'd like to, but I can't," Mrs. Croft said. "I'm still baking for the sale, and then there's a theater meeting this afternoon. A lot of people were buying tickets this morning."

"Why don't you sit with us to watch the second game, Peter?" Karen offered.

"Let me put away my tools of ignorance, and I'll be back."

"What are your 'tools of ignorance'?"

"My catcher's equipment. My dad says any reasonably smart player would avoid being the catcher, especially in July and August."

Peter waddled back to the dugout in his flapping shin guards, and sat down on the pine, removing his equipment and cramming it in his duffel bag. A large hand-painted sign for 'Sno-Cones' beckoned him to join a long concession line. As he stood in line, he spotted Mike and Jo talking in the shade of an oak.

Peter picked up a small rock and threw it near them, to draw their attention. They looked up and waved, but didn't come over to visit him. In her sunglasses, Jo looked like a broken-hearted movie star. Peter thought he saw her wipe a tear from her cheek.

Rejoining Karen in the bleachers, he offered the mushiest grape-syrup-saturated part of the ice to her. Her lips turned purple from bobbing in the paper cone for the slush.

"How was your walk home last night?" Peter asked Ataninnuaq.

"I did not walk home immediately. I stood in front of the black car, and after three minutes they backed down the street and left."

"How did you know they would leave?"

"I did not know what they would do. I only knew my choice. The Nephilim are growing desperate. Their time on earth is coming to an end."

Roswell came on the field to start the second game, and Peter took mental notes as 'Grease' made short and fast work of the New Jersey batters. Roswell left the field, owners of a convincing victory.

"Your friend Grease is somewhat like the great Satchel Paige," Ataninnuaq observed. "He throws odd balls."

Peter, Karen and Ataninnuaq stood from the bleachers and stretched. Thousands of spectators fanned themselves with baseball programs in the early afternoon heat.

"What are you doing the rest of the day?" Karen asked.

"Why not sit with me in my booth and sell tickets?"

"I don't have anything planned. When should we meet?"

"I'm there from four until seven. You know where it is, on North Drive in the park."

"I might be late, but I'll be there."

Saying his good-byes, Peter hiked home from Memorial Park. His mother requested his dirty uniform so she could wash and press it, and Peter went upstairs for a hot shower and shave. After experiencing the cool, fresh feeling of Ice Blue Aqua Velva aftershave, in the fragrance he could trust, Peter bounded downstairs to watch TV. Lying down on the braided rug with a couch pillow under his head, and Oso's head on his chest, he watched 'Streets of Laredo' on the Afternoon Film Festival. When the movie ended at four-thirty, he headed to the park to meet Karen.

When their eyes met across the lot, Karen stepped from the ticket booth and danced towards him, full of life and

warmth. His breathing stopped when her delicate arms greeted him with a hug. Somehow, she looked very different to him, and he wondered if it was the afternoon light.

"You smell nice. What's the jingle from the commercial? *'There's something about an Aqua Velva man'*," Karen sang, in her best sultry voice, stroking Peter's smoothly shaven cheek, before breaking out in laughter. "I'm so glad you came to keep me company. The ticket sales have been steady, and I already have twenty-four variety show entries."

Peter noticed a new privacy fence, surrounding the stage, and they strolled down the dale that formed a natural amphitheater. He ran his hand along the shade cloth.

"The fence is a good idea. Now only people with tickets can get in. How much money have we raised so far?"

"Over eight hundred dollars," Karen said. "Speaking of which, there are people at the booth, waiting to buy tickets. We better hurry back."

A visiting family bought four tickets, kicking off a busy afternoon and early evening, as friends, customers and visitors came to the booth for information and conversation. Mike flew up on his motorbike, skidding to a stop that slung gravel against the booth. He pulled up an extra chair.

"Did you guys see that the Blackthorne Youth have set up a booth by the midway? We planned this festival and they're robbing it, by signing up kids from the visiting teams," Mike grouched. "They're planning another torch

parade around the park, during the eclipse."

"My dad says it's all legal, and there's nothing we can do," Peter said. "What were you and Jo talking about at the ball field? You looked pretty serious."

"Jo is out of the magic show," Mike lamented. "Whitson is black-mailing her into helping with that stupid Blackthorne Youth ceremony. But she also said that even moving in the heat was making her nauseous. She's okay lying down in her room, but she's sure that spinning in the sarcophagus will make her throw up in the middle of the show."

"Who's going to replace her?" Peter asked. "We designed everything to match her."

For once Mike didn't have a quick answer. He sat in silence, staring at the midway.

"I could stand in," Karen offered. "I know the trick, and even though I'm not as tall as Jo maybe we could adjust things."

Mike studied Karen's features, recognizing for the first time some of her dramatic potential. He imagined her dark eyes in thick Egyptian mascara with long lashes, gold ornaments holding her dark hair in braids. He saw a jewel-encrusted headband across her brow, draped in a white gown, shining against her bronze skin.

"I was thinking of asking Trina Hudgins, but you might work. The mannequin needs to duplicate your coloring, and your hair and the wig would need to match. If we cut a few

inches at the torso, we can remove some of the mannequin's height. That's a lot of work. We would need more help from your dad, and Jo's the artist for the make-up and wigs."

"I'm willing, and I'm sure my dad will help. It sounds fun."

"I'll head home and call Jo. I'll be back to let you know the plan."

Mike kick-started his Triumph and raced off, leaving Peter and Karen to study each other.

"Partners again, I guess," Karen smiled. "Is it fate that keeps throwing us together? You're not going to drop me when I'm upside down under the stage are you?"

"Accidents happen," Peter teased.

"Peter, Udjuk told me I could trust you," Karen said, punching his arm softly. "You better not drop me."

Twenty minutes later Mike returned with his report.

"Okay, Jo's going to help out, but she needs Karen over at her house, pronto, to get started on matching the mannequin's color to hers. We'll take over here at the booth, right, Chum?"

"Are you sure? This is my shift and I'm responsible for the money and the tickets."

"Yeah, it's okay," Peter said. "I've got the ticket speech down, and we only have to cover another hour."

"I'll give you a lift over, and then come back. You'll get there faster."

Karen jumped in behind Mike and they roared off. Peter

waited for his next batch of customers, and shortly a group of visiting players, herded by three men, approached the booth. Peter immediately recognized Grease among them, standing between two men in dark suits. A man in white short-sleeves walked over, and the Roswell team surrounded him on all sides, pressing to get in front.

"We'd like to buy tickets for ourselves and our team. Why is there a difference in the price of tickets?"

Peter repeated from memory Karen's sales pitch.

"Tickets to the separate shows are fifty cents, but they're standing room only. We're selling a lot of the two-dollar armbands. A two-dollar armband gets you a guaranteed seat at all three shows, and the Kiwanis will serve you a chicken or barbecue dinner. The dinner will be very good, and includes bread rolls, coleslaw, an ear of buttered corn and dessert to go with the meat."

"The armbands sound like the best deal, Mr. Braxton," a player in an orange shirt said. "The dinner alone is worth more than a dollar."

"All right. We'll take twenty-six armbands."

Peter counted out the armbands while Mr. Braxton counted out the money, pocketing the armbands in his jacket. He walked back to talk with the two men in black, as the Roswell team crowded around the booth.

"You're from the Williamsport team, aren't you?" the guy in orange asked. "You're the catcher."

"That's right," Peter said, "and you guys are the Roswell

team, right?"

"Right. We saw you guys last night at the fair when Grease helped you win the elephant, and we watched your game today."

Mike returned, skidding up beside the booth. The Roswell team admired his cycle.

"We know your names from the program, Mike and Peter."

"He goes by Chum or Chumbucket," Mike said. "What's yours?"

"Billy Stribling, but everyone calls me 'The Kid'. I've gotten used to it. I'm from the same county in New Mexico as Billy The Kid, Lincoln County. You see Grease over there? He's the pitcher, and I'm his catcher. This is Al, Harry, Tommy, David and Guy. We're looking for a burger joint. Do you guys have any suggestions?"

"The Atomic Shake, out on the highway, is pretty good. We go there a lot."

"Any chance you'll get out there tonight?"

"What do you think, Chum?"

"Sounds fun. We play catch in the grass lot next door, even at night, under the lights. Bring your gloves."

"So, we'll see you over there in about an hour?"

"We'll try to get over, but right now we should get back to selling tickets. I think there's a family behind you guys that wants to buy."

"Sorry, we'll move," Billy apologized. "See you later."

A couple stepped forward to buy tickets. Mike and Peter sold another twenty-four tickets in the next half-hour, and at seven, they turned the booth and the cigar box full of money over to a woman from the theater group.

They checked in at Peter's house for baseball gloves, before heading out, retracing the path they took the night of the town hall fire. The roof line was still covered in a make-do fashion, with a large tarp.

"They should arrest whoever is responsible for that fire," Mike said, "probably delinquents or out-of-town thugs, but I know it wasn't Mr. Scott."

The yellow atoms on the Atomic Shake sign raced around the brightly lit nucleus of a hamburger and shake. The Roswell team was already seated at a table out front, chowing down, and Billy hailed Mike and Peter over to his table. Grease sat at another table, with the two men who were ever-present at his side.

"We brought our gloves," Billy said. "We've already been throwing some. It won't get super dark for a while yet. Have some of my fries, it's a big basket."

Billy pushed his basket of fries towards Mike and Peter.

"You pitched a great game today," Billy said. "Seventeen strikeouts, wow!"

"Grease pitched a nice game, too," Peter said. "What's with his nickname, 'Grease'? Does he throw a grease ball or something?"

Billy looked at Peter and grinned.

"No, that's his last name, Gris. G-R-I-S. It means Gray in Spanish. His name is Juan Gris. In English it would be like 'John Gray'."

"He doesn't look Spanish. Is his father from Mexico?"

"No, New Mexico. Juan's father died before he was born, and his mother is a scientist at White Sands. She raised him, with the help of his two uncles. His uncles keep his papers with them, in case there's any question about him being human, I mean American, not human.

He's an American."

"He looks American to me, right Chum? Why don't we go get something to eat?"

Walking to the counter, Mike whistled an eerie tune.

"Grease is an odd ball. He might be a great pitcher, but something is not right about him."

"I like him," Peter said, "but he is a little different."

"More than a little, Chum."

They both ordered a double-decker Atomic Burger, Meteorite fries and Out-of-This-World shake. The Roswell players posed innumerable questions about Williamsport.

"So what do you guys do for fun?" Al asked.

Mike and Peter looked to each other for an answer, but nothing came to mind.

"We just do stuff," Peter said. "It seems like we did stuff all summer, but right now I can't think of anything."

"It's the same in Roswell," Harry said. "We just hang out and do stuff."

"Are you guys done eating?" Billy asked. "Let's go play catch."

The teens went to the open lot beside the restaurant, tossing balls back and forth in the evening air. His uncles allowed Grease to join, but they silently watched him from the shadowy edge of the lot.

"Let me catch some of your pitches before it gets too dark," Peter said to Grease. "Billy, why don't you catch Mike?"

Beneath the circling atom lights, the pitchers hurled to the crouched and studious catchers.

"Your pitches are lively," Peter said to Grease. "You move the ball around, but I get the feeling you aren't showing me half of what you can do."

"Why don't we have a contest?" Billy said. "I bet a quarter I can catch every ball Mike throws, and Grease can throw at least one by you. But only throws in the strike zone count."

"How many throws?" Mike asked.

"Three throws," Billy said. "We'll throw so the side of the diner is a backstop."

"You're on," Mike said, "but let's make it a dollar."

"A dollar then," Billy agreed. "I'll catch first."

Billy squatted down, and Mike paced off the sixty foot regulation distance.

"Get ready for the hammer," Mike said, winding up and delivering a high fastball that Billy snagged and tossed back

to him.

"Just loosening up," Mike said, "but this one will break your hand."

He fired off another pitch, and the ball popped like a cherry bomb in Billy's mitt. The Kid winced slightly and threw the ball back to Mike.

"Last one," Billy said, "better be your best one, because I haven't seen it yet."

Mike decided to throw a two-seam fastball to get a late break and surprise Billy. He softened his back leg to create more spring, and came hard over, across his body with a lengthened stride. The beautiful pitch moved hard inside the last few feet, but Billy was able to get his glove in front at the last moment. He held the ball framed for Mike.

"Stee-rike!" Billy called out. "Nice pitch. Chumbucket, you're up."

Peter watched Grease carefully as he coiled into his wind-up and then kicked out to deliver a weird ball that rotated counter to Peter's experience. The ball dove wickedly to the inside corner a few feet in front of Peter and he trapped it low.

"That was wild," Peter said, "but it would have been a strike."

Grease's second pitch came in low and rose in the air steadily like a fast balloon. The ball did not spin, or move one jot left or right. It just continued to rise all the way through the strike zone, and Peter handled the pitch easily.

Grease's third and last pitch started in the same way as the second pitch but came in faster, appearing to dive down and into the strike zone. Peter moved his glove down to trap it like the first pitch, but at the last possible moment the ball cut outwards and up. He quickly adjusted but the ball glanced off the top of his mitt and flew into the screen door, tearing open the screen panel, and dropping inside the restaurant. The other boys, except Grease, ran. Peter opened the screen to pick up the ball.

"You might get in trouble if anyone inside sees you," Grease said. "I am going to rejoin my uncles and you might want to start running."

Grease ran off, and Peter felt a familiar impulse to run away, but something inside checked him. Peter knew this was another defining moment. He carried the ball around to the front window and asked to see the manager.

"A friend and I were playing ball," Peter confessed. "He was teaching me something new, and the ball went through the screen on your back door. I'm sorry. I'll pay for damages."

"Ah, don't sweat it," the manager said. "That screen is always coming out, but thanks for telling me. I would've been mad if I'd seen it ripped out, and not known how or why it happened."

"I still feel bad about it. Let me know if I can do something to make it good."

"Yeah, say, come back when school starts again, and

apply for a job. I can always use an honest worker."

"Really? That would be great, thanks, I will."

Peter left the window feeling very light. He recognized his heart was a little lighter every day, since he'd begun to listen to his inner voice. He thought of how Udjuk had been the first to teach him to listen, and pay attention to his inner world. His intuition was becoming more clear and available to him every day. He took Udjuk out of his pocket and stared into his glowing green eyes.

"What is that?"

Peter turned around to find Grease at his shoulder.

"It was a gift, and I broke it. It's a stone carved many years ago."

"Can I see it?"

Peter handed Udjuk to Grease for study.

"I'm surprised you went to the manager, but it was the right thing to do. It is unusual to see someone do the right thing when they don't have to."

Grease handed Udjuk back to Peter.

"I can fix your stone's fracture but it needs irradiation and heat under high pressure. At the laboratory where I study, I have the necessary equipment to repair it. If you trust me I will fix and return your stone."

"I don't know; it's bad enough I broke Udjuk in the first place. If he gets lost..."

Coach Braxton put his fingers to his lips and whistled.

"C'mon, we're heading back to the dorms."

"Think about it," Grease said. "I'll see you another time, good night."

Grease joined Coach Braxton and the two tall men he called his uncles. Peter didn't think the men behaved like uncles. They were humorless and showed no affection towards Grease, or towards any of the other players. The Roswell team walked off in a group as Mike strolled up beside Peter.

"Well, Billy the Kid robbed me of a dollar. Grease must throw some tough balls to get one by you."

"I'm going to try to find out more about him, but I think we might be playing them for the championship."

At Memorial Field the next day, Billy's bright orange shirt immediately arrested Peter's eye, and he made his way up the bleachers to sit beside him.

"Who's in the first game?" Peter asked.

"Crockett, California and Ann Arbor, Michigan," Billy said. "Where's your friend Mike?"

"He's taking the day off from baseball. We're in the show Saturday, and he's helping with some last-minute things. Can I see your program? I want to see who we might play."

Billy handed his program to Peter, who flipped through its pages, until he came to the second game.

"So it's either Wilson, North Carolina or Foxborough, Massachusetts for us. You know, I can't believe Grease got his pitch by me. How do you catch him?"

"I put my glove where I know the ball will be. With

Grease, I can't trust what I see with my eyes. I'll see it coming inside, but it's really headed outside. I put my mitt where he intends."

"It would take a lot of trust in each other to not have a thousand passed balls."

"I've caught him for two years. I don't even think about him missing his spot. He's uncanny."

"Do we play first tomorrow, or you?"

"You guys are first, good luck."

"You too, see you tomorrow."

It was early afternoon when Peter left Memorial Field. Cool air from Canada loaned Pennsylvania the barest hint of the coming fall, and the big northern sky was a clear soft blue. Peter had no particular place to go, and he wandered for about ten minutes. He had fifteen cents in his pocket after buying four hot dogs and two sodas at the ballpark. He did not want to go home, and fifteen cents would not last long on the midway.

Peter decided to call on Jo, and he walked to her house across the Lycoming College campus. Birds twittered in and out of the large elm that sheltered him during the Nephilim attack. He ducked under the limbs, and stood on the bare ground where he had fought for his life. A thought occurred to him that, in another timeline, he had lost a life under the tree, but he'd walked away with eight lives left. It was calm and quiet in the tree's shade, and when he ended his reflections, he continued towards Jo's house. Peter spotted

Mike's motorbike near the bushes in front of Jo's house, and Mike opened her door. Karen was modeling for Jo while she applied matching tones to the mannequin's face. Peter noticed the ruby necklace was off Jo's neck.

"I would get up and say hello but I'm supposed to stay still," Karen said. "Last night Jo used some of my dad's car repair plastic to sculpt the mannequin's face to look more like me, and then she sanded it smooth. Now she's painting it to match my coloring and features. Isn't she a wonderful artist?"

"Yes, it's amazing how much you look like the dummy," Peter said, laughing when he realized how his words came out. "Oops! I didn't mean it that way."

"Peter, you can help Mike sort the beads by color," Jo suggested. "When we're finished here, Karen and I will weave them into the braids on the wigs."

Peter sat on the floor near Mike, grabbing a handful of mixed beads to sort.

"Why aren't you wearing your necklace, Jo?" he asked.

"Because it's not my necklace. Last night I confronted my mom, and she admitted it might be from Ted Whitson. Turns out, he was the one who found it and convinced her that it was a lost gift to me from my dad. It was all gift-wrapped in a white box with a pretty red bow. What a weirdo! My mom finally told him to get out, and I was able to drop out of the Blackthorne Youth. Last night was the first night I've slept well in a long time."

"Where's the necklace now?" Mike asked.

"My mom threw it at him and he left with it. Oh, he gives me the creeps!"

"You know what gives me the creeps?" Mike asked. "I got a letter in the mail today. Let me read it to you."

Mike pulled a single page letter from an envelope in his pocket and began reading.

"Dear Mikey, as you may know I love poetry and although I still don't get rhymes, I'm learning fast. I didn't have the old thing I needed, and I wanted something new, so for the big event I borrowed something blue (just for you). It's all in good fun. xoxo - B.' What do you guys think it means?"

"Those are things brides need before their wedding - something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue," Karen said. "Were you invited to a wedding?"

"There's no wedding I know about."

"It's probably a prank," Karen said. "The room already feels lighter. Jo, if I can be honest with you, that necklace weighed us all down. I could feel it's heavy influence whenever I was within six feet of you. I wore one of those rings for about an hour, and it was dispiriting. You wore a much larger gem constantly for over a month. You're a strong person."

"I worried about you, too," Mike added. "The Nephilim want you especially, and they planned on using that

necklace to control you."

"Thank you, Karen, but Mike, I don't believe any of that Nephilim hokum," Jo said.

"It doesn't matter if you believe it, because the Nephilim believe it. They don't need you to believe, they don't even want you to believe. They just want you to do what they need done, when they want it done, willing or not. They planned to kidnap both you and Peter, just like they did Jim and Leslie, and that's the truth. We were going to hold you down and yank that necklace off, if it came to that, but luckily it didn't. We're all together tomorrow night, during the eclipse. No one's wearing a stone, and unless the Nephilim can kidnap all of us, in front of a crowd, with no witnesses, I'd say we're safe. We only have our games to worry about, right, Chum? Who do we play tomorrow?"

"We play North Carolina. They creamed Massachusetts eight to two."

"I hate to leave the pitching to someone else."

"Are you ready for the show tomorrow night?" Peter asked.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Mike said. "Karen, we should demonstrate our levitation trick for Peter and Jo. It'll be good practice for the show."

"Okay, but they need to sit against the door, and we'll do the trick by the window."

Peter and Jo moved their chairs, to make room for Karen to lie on the floor, while Mike handed an ordinary white

sheet to them for inspection. Mike snatched the sheet back, and stood in front of Karen, draping it over her form, while spreading his hands and murmuring incantations. Slowly, gradually, Karen's body lifted off the ground, rising to a height of about two feet, before slowly returning to the floor. Mike snapped the sheet off Karen, and she lay calm and still, as if she had never moved from her spot.

"How'd you do that?" Peter asked in amazement.

"Magic," Karen said, sitting back down in her chair to continue her pose. Jo resumed painting the mannequin's head, and Mike leaned over to whisper in Peter's ear.

"Do you remember Karen thinking Jo was nothing but trouble? They look like best friends now."

Peter looked over at Jo as she was studiously comparing her paint color to Karen's complexion. Karen noticed Peter's stare and smiled softly at him.

"It was a good trick," Peter said. "I didn't know you knew magic. What's your next trick?"

"Oh, I thought you knew. You're next."

21

THE MAGIC SHOW

PETER STOOD TO THE SIDE of home plate as the North Carolina batter rounded third base and jogged home, putting Williamsport behind 1-0 in the top of the first. Peter gave a quick handshake to the batter, before asking the umpire to give him a new ball to put in play. Tuck retired the next batter to end the inning and Peter met him in the infield on the way to their dugout.

"This team shelled Massachusetts yesterday," Peter said. "Did you see the game?"

"Yeah, I watched it, but it's just the first inning. I don't think I followed through, and the curve stayed up. It'll get better."

Tuck's breezy optimism left Peter unconvinced, and when he came to the plate with two outs, he felt a desperate need to energize his team. On a two-and-two count, Peter tagged a fastball to left field for a single, occasioning an eruption of claps and cheers from the Millionaire's drowsy dugout.

Peter took a small lead off first base, and his eyes bugged

out when Coach Howell gave him the steal signal. When the ball left the pitcher's hand, Peter took off as fast as a truck horse could run and beat it towards second, but the bag seemed a million miles away. His solid legs pounded the base path with little of the desired effect of moving his body forward quickly. He saw the catcher's throw and dropped to his slide, just under the tag of the second baseman.

"Safe!" the base umpire cried out.

Peter stood at second, asking for time to step away and dust himself off. His teammates laughed and shouted humorous slurs against his speed from the dugout. He waved in acknowledgment and grinned. It was his first and only stolen base of the season. He stepped back to the bag, looking to Coach Jaworzky at third base for further instructions. Coach Jaworzky smiled and held his hands down, in an obvious signal to stay put.

On the third pitch Tom Majors smacked the ball to right field, and Peter was off and running. The ball landed fair, bounding towards the corner. Coach Jaworzky swung his arm around and around to signal Peter to keep running. Sympathy for the opposing catcher did not allow him to barrel in, but he hooped it hard and hit the dirt for a second time, hooking his left leg and touching the plate beneath the throw.

"Safe!" the umpire roared.

Peter's joyous teammates poured out of the dugout to congratulate him and celebrate the run. Tom stood at second

clapping, and the rally was on. After several more innings of the lead switching back and forth, the game seemed destined to go into extra innings when Vince Dunn swatted a fastball into the left field fence for a double. Rocket followed with a scratch hit up the middle to score Vince and secure the 8-7 win. The excited Millionaires surrounded an embarrassed Vince.

"We're in the final!" Mike yelled. "I know I said it was a sure thing, but I can't believe it! I get to pitch for the World Series Championship!"

"What a game," Peter shouted. "We had to crawl back in it every inning."

The delirium on the field lasted for fifteen minutes as the hometown crowd celebrated their hard-fought and dramatic victory. Peter and Mike stayed to watch Roswell beat Crockett, California.

"It's us against Roswell," Mike said as they left the stands. "The fates determined it a thousand years ago."

"I think it was just determined," Peter said. "6-3."

"Mikey!" a girl's voice called out.

Mike looked up at the highest seats in the emptying stands. A slender girl in a bright blue dress called down, motioning him to join her.

"Stay here, Chum. I'll be back. I'm going to find out what this girl wants."

Mike bounded up into the stands. When he came near to the girl, her tattered blue dress, barbarian hair and shining

eyes alarmed him.

"Do you like what I've done with myself, Mikey?"

Mike thought he recognized Leslie DeBrulle, missing for over two months and presumed dead, but what Mike couldn't make sense of was that he hardly knew Leslie, and she'd certainly never called him 'Mikey'. Leslie was quiet and refined, and this primitive girl was twirling around on the narrow bleacher, encouraging Mike to admire her figure. Mike avoided her lips when she leaned in to give him a big hug and kiss, and her zappy behavior and appearance disturbed him. Mike looked around the ballpark for the girl's family.

"Do you have any family here with you?"

"Oh, screw my family, and screw the neighbors! Hahaha!" A peal of ridiculous laughter escaped her wide mouth, and she stuck out her tongue and wiggled it in Mike's face. She smooched her lips and closed her eyes. "Give me a *real* kiss, Mikey. Plant a big fat wet one on my lips. I forgive you for all the terrible things you've done to me. You're so rough, practically tearing my arms off! Hahaha! But let's start over!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think we know each other."

"Mikey! How can you be so silly? We know each other like peanut butter and jelly! And after the eclipse tonight we can be together, forever!"

"I don't think so. Look, I'll try to find someone who knows you and can help. Wait here."

Mike escaped down the bleachers, the nutty girl shouting after him as he raced away.

"Mikey, didn't you get my love note?" she called. "Something borrowed, something blue?"

Mike ignored her, continuing his scramble away, as the jilted girl screamed after him, at the top of her lungs. "You really don't remember me, do you? Or even what you said to Karen at the crematorium? Screw the neighbors! Hahaha. Okay, be that way, Buster! But do me one little favor. Tell Karen I want my belt back, dammit!"

Mike stopped as a cold shock of recognition flew up his chilled spine. Bob. He spun around to see Bob-Leslie leaping over the back rail, and he sprinted to the top in pursuit, tracking her blue dress as she zigzagged away through the crowd, quickly disappearing from sight. Mike rejoined Peter.

"It was Leslie DeBrulle, only she's not herself at all," Mike said. "She's...I mean she's acting really strange, like one of the Nephilim has control of her body, but I don't think it's a permanent control yet."

"She's a missing person," Peter said. "You should report seeing her to your dad. I'm sure her parents would want to know."

"And say what, Chum? That Leslie DeBrulle reappeared at the game today? In the bleachers, only it's not Leslie, it's an interdimensional demon named Bob, thousands of years old, using her body for the day, on loan? I'll let someone else

report that news. It's one-thirty now, and we better get over to Brandon Park and check on things."

At the edge of the ball fields they saw Commissioner Scott standing in exile with his wife and two daughters, away from the celebration. He waved them over to say hello.

"You played a great game today, Chum. I've never seen you run so fast," Mr. Scott laughed. "Have you ever stolen a base before?"

"No, sir," Peter gave an embarrassed smile. "Coach gave me the sign to run so I had to go, but I didn't think I'd ever get there. Are you coming to the show tonight?"

"I'll be in the standing room area. I waited too long to buy a seat, and it's a sold out house. I think we're over fifteen hundred dollars in ticket sales."

"Really? Sold out. That's incredible," Peter said. "I'll see you there tonight, then."

"Not if I see you first," Mr. Scott grinned.

At the park, Mike and Peter met up with Karen and Jo, as well as four teammates, who were serving as priests of Anubis. From the stage they could see over the fence into the parking area, and beyond to the midway lot. Families seated themselves outside, enjoying the cooler air, and a line of early diners formed at the Kiwanis serving tables.

"Karen, when I say 'Bring me the priestess' the guys will carry you from behind the curtains to the center of the stage. All you have to do is lie quietly. I'll tell them to tie your jaw

shut with a linen cloth, so your soul doesn't escape out of your mouth. Then comes the levitation we practiced. When we finish that trick, the guys will carry you to the altar."

"When do we strap her in?" Tom asked.

"I'll say 'Strap the body down.' You guys strap her in, and I'll close the lid before we carry her to the altar, it's that easy. Chum, you remove the false floor, crank Karen down and send the dummy up. When you're ready, push the signal button, and I'll reopen the lid to light the dummy on fire."

"What should Karen and I be doing while we're below the stage?"

"I can't help you there, buddy, but I'm sure you'll figure it out for yourself," Mike grinned, and Peter blushed when he took his meaning. Peter's teammates laughed with Mike, until Karen came to his rescue.

"Mike, be serious. We don't have a lot of time for foolishness."

"Okay, okay. Chum, below stage you'll pull the outer robe off Karen, so her duplicate burnt robe shows, and then place the scorched gold bands around her forehead and neck. They'll match the shiny ones I'm lighting up on stage. When I'm done I'll close the lid, and press the signal button for you to crank Karen topside again. The dummy will rotate back to you and there might be a small flame or two still going. You snuff them out with the fire extinguisher, as we finish the trick above. Any questions?"

The group of eight looked to each other and there were

no questions.

"All right, let's run it through. All the masks and costumes are backstage. Karen, all we'll do for you now are the gold bands."

The priests went backstage with Karen to prepare their entrance. Peter slung his duffel bag over his shoulder, carrying the box of tools and props to his designated troll spot below stage. The heavy drapes covering the stage sides blocked almost all light from entering. Even in the bright afternoon, he found it necessary to turn on his helmet lamp. He inspected the contents of the box: the hand crank, gold bands, cotter pin and fire extinguisher.

Peter knelt in the dry grass, looking up at the false floor and signal button. He captured an occasional muffled word or phrase from Mike between the thumping of footfalls above him. He heard Mike's voice on the altar, and then followed the sounds of the centipede steps of the bearers. Peter removed the false floor when he heard the heavy 'clomp' of the sarcophagus set in the altar, and the lifeless mannequin appeared facing him. He fit the crank in the shaft, and turned it smoothly and quietly. The mannequin rotated topside and a smiling Karen appeared below, facing him. Peter secured the shaft with the cotter pin.

"The bands," Karen reminded him.

Peter fumbled in the box for the bands and then slid them neatly along the sides of Karen's head and neck. The metal cups were scorched to simulate fire damage.

"Tonight you'll remove the outer gown I'm wearing to uncover the burnt duplicate, and then we just wait for Mike's signal. I'll have the linen cloth tied around my jaw to keep my mouth shut. You can untie it when we're below as long as you remember to tie it up again."

"How's it feel to be suspended upside down?"

"I'm okay. There's a little pressure on my arms and legs. It might help if you supported my head so my neck doesn't strain so much."

Peter placed his hands along the sides of Karen's cheeks, supporting her head. Her cheeks felt soft and warm, and an unspoken intimacy bound them together in the darkness.

"I'll keep my eyes closed while we wait. Your headlamp is very bright."

When Peter heard the lid close on stage he waited for the red light signal from Mike, and it came about a minute later.

"Bye," Karen said. "Nice seeing you again."

"Later, gator," Peter replied, removing the cotter pin, before turning the soundless crank. Karen rotated up and the dummy appeared, only now it was wearing gold bands matching Karen's. He replaced the cotter pin, and left the dummy undisturbed because there was no fire on this practice run. Peter passed another minute before he heard Mike call him loudly from up on stage.

"Hey, Chum, take the crank out so we can remove the sarcophagus, and replace the false floor before you come back up."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Peter decided to leave the box and his bag below the stage. He returned to the bright surface world, blinking like a mole.

"Any problems?" Mike asked.

"Nope," Peter answered, "pretty easy."

"Okay, let's all meet at the performers' entrance at eight-thirty sharp tonight. Everybody bring a flashlight."

At home, Peter stretched out on his bed, considering the possibilities for the next day's championship. He repeatedly imagined himself batting against Grease. He recreated the pitch Grease had thrown by him, and committed it to memory. He visualized swinging at the pitch repeatedly, until he was connecting solidly with the imaginary ball. He fell into a short nap and awakened at the call to dinner.

Peter returned to the park in the early evening, flashing his light through the bushes and trees of his neighborhood. Ataninnuaq's gift of the *qilaut* gave him the confidence to walk alone in the deepening dusk. Coming into the park he saw the Blackthorne Youth torchlight parade set out on their march, with their scores of waving flames departing into the darkness. He met an enthusiastic Mike at the performers' entrance, along with his teammates, in the guise of the priests of Anubis.

"The play is in its last act," Mike said. "Karen's already backstage and Jo's applying her makeup. Why don't you go check below the stage and make sure everything is good

down there?"

Peter stumbled his way over power cords to the back corner of the stage, shining his flashlight under the stage to pick out his bag and the equipment box. He ventured inside, checking the light on his helmet, and found everything in perfect order. He looked up at the bottom of the stage and heard the voices of the actors in the play above him:

"Doesn't anyone ever realize life while they live it?" the actress' voice sadly asked. "Every, every minute?"

"No," the narrator's voice responded. "Saints and poets, maybe. They do some."

Peter returned to the open air. Standing in the moist grass, and leaning out to see the crowd, he picked out Grease sitting in a seat near the stage. Mr. Scott peered at the play from the standing room only section, and the sight of three Nephilim wearing their black hats and suits, standing behind Mr. Scott troubled Peter. The moon resembled a half-peeled orange, and a summer storm brewed in the tossing leaves. Peter returned to the rear of the stage to report to Mike.

Mike looked magnificent as the Egyptian Magician Amen-Hopen, wearing a white kilt wrapped at his waist and an imitation leopard skin across his chest. The soul catcher served as his kilt pin and the bone war club was tucked inside the leopard skin. The skin was intact with the head, paws and tail of a great cat. A gold egg-shaped helmet with a train of white fabric completed his outfit. Peter patted the

dangling cat head.

"This is cool. Who made it?"

"Jo made it out of a ruined white fox fur that Whitson tried to pawn off on her mother as a birthday gift. Is everything ready down below?"

"Ready, Freddy. How about you guys?"

At the foot of the stairs Amen-Hopen's jackal-headed assistants nodded gravely, jostling one another aside as Mike stepped up in readiness to ascend the stairs. The audience applauded the Our Town cast's curtain call.

"Okay," Peter said. "I'm heading below, see you after the show. Good luck."

Peter hopscotched his way through the wires to the rear corner and lifted the covering. Before going under the drape he again searched for Mr. Scott in the crowd, finding him bathed in an obscuring cloud of cigarette smoke, applauding the performers. The unavoidable Mr. Blackthorne lurked behind Mr. Scott, pulling on a glowing cigarette butt through the hole in his throat. Beside Blackthorne, Peter recognized the errant Leslie DeBrulle, in her tattered blue dress, excitedly clapping her hands. Three Nephilim hemmed Mr. Scott in.

Peter moved quickly to where Grease stood applauding and tapped him on the shoulder. Grease turned to him and smiled. Peter whispered a brief explanation of the situation, gave Grease his flashlight, and asked him to keep an eye on the dark men in their hats. Grease nodded his understanding,

and gave Peter the 'thumbs up' sign. Suppressing his growing unease, Peter returned to slide between the folds of fabric and go under the stage.

Backstage, Jo finished the last touches to Karen's makeup, surveying her work proudly. "You look wonderful," she said, "like a beautiful princess."

Karen stood from her chair, and spontaneously touched her nose to Jo's, adding a warm hug.

"You feel warm, Jo, like you still have a fever. I wish you were the princess. You've been so sweet. You're not anything like I imagined you were. You're serious and hardworking. I think I was the one judging you on surface things, and I also might have been a little jealous."

"And there I was, always insecure around you! Had I known! I'll see you after the show. Break a leg," Jo smiled, leaving the stage wings and hurrying to the stairs, passing Mike and his servants on her way down. "You guys will do great. I'll be watching from the audience. I'll remember everything and tell you all about it, after the show."

Jo walked around the stage into the standing room only audience. Stagehands drew the front curtains closed, while the crowd stood to stretch and talk about the play. A distant boom of thunder had the audience looking up at the gathering clouds. The creamsicle moon briefly disappeared behind a rack of dark thunderheads, and Jo felt a shiver of goose flesh pop out on her exposed arms. She wondered if the chill came from the sudden cold air or a fever. To her

right, she caught sight of one of the Nephilim staring at her. He sidled towards her through one ring of the audience. Jo crossed her arms over her chest, wishing she had thought to bring a sweater.

"Did I just feel a raindrop?" a man at her side wondered. "I think I did."

"You look cold," a gentle voice said. "Take my jacket."

Jo looked to her left and saw the peculiar boy from the carnival offering her his baseball jacket. She gratefully accepted it around her shoulders.

"Thank you. I forgot my sweater."

"De nada," Grease said. "I hope it keeps you warm until the show is over. I'll find you afterwards. It's about to start."

Grease excused himself, moving behind Jo and towards the approaching Nephilim. He pointed the bright flashlight beam at their eyes as he slid through the crowd, forcing them to turn away.

Jo's attention returned to the stage when a tall jackal-headed figure appeared in front of the drawn curtains, wearing white robes and a jeweled breastplate. In his right hand, he held a large writhing black snake. Jo recognized Tom's voice when the figure spoke.

"My name is D'jedi, a priest of Anubis. I appear before you to introduce the greatest magician of our ancient age, the possessor of magic, the one who performs magic, the effector of magical speech, excellent of words and incantations: Amen-Hopen! The Egyptian Magician of

Rockin'-N-Rollin'!"

D'jedi swung his arm dramatically, and the high curtains parted to reveal Amen-Hopen striding to the center of the stage. Amen-Hopen held out his right arm to the priest of Anubis and the sinuous snake flew from the lower priest's hand, racing across the stage floor into Amen-Hopen's open palm. Amen-Hopen shook the snake and it became a long black rod.

"I challenge any and all magicians to defeat my magic," Amen-Hopen roared. "I turn water into blood, speak to the spirits of nature, and make a handful of corn feed an army. I cause the cattle of my enemies to disappear. I raise the dead."

"What is it you require to do all these marvelous things, master?" his priest asked.

"Bring me an urn of unspoiled water," Amen-Hopen ordered.

D'jedi rolled out a large upturned five-gallon water bottle. Amen-Hopen raised his staff above the urn, murmuring incantations before tapping the side of the bottle, which instantly turned the water a deep blood red. The crowd let out an amazed gasp and applauded, and even Jo smiled to herself. She knew the secret of the trick, along with what came next. Scores of frogs poured out the top, spilling over the sides of the urn, water gushing out on all sides, as the hopping frogs sailed off the stage into the audience. Children in the audience squealed and shouted

with delight.

"Rise from the blood, my pets, and infest the land of my enemies," Amen-Hopen commanded. He grabbed one of the rising frogs, and held it to his ear.

"What say, my pet? My people are hungry? We must feed them! D'jedi, bring me my Manna-Maker."

D'jedi rolled out a large black cylinder about four feet long and two feet in diameter. On the sides, written in elegant white lettering, were the words 'Manna-Maker'. It looked like a new product from Westinghouse.

"Priest of Anubis, prove to the unbelievers the cylinder is empty."

D'jedi tilted the Manna-Maker down, and Amen-Hopen stuck his staff down inside the empty tube.

"Shuck that measly ear of corn on the table there, and place its kernels inside the Manna-Maker."

The diligent D'jedi tore away the husks and tassels of the corn ear before running the ear through a hand-held device to remove its kernels. Amen-Hopen waved his staff over the corn and recited magic words. D'jedi tossed the shucked kernels of corn into the tube and only then did Amen-Hopen direct its mouth towards the audience, holding his staff to the end of the tube. The rod's tip produced a flame, igniting a fuse on the Manna-Maker. The crowd instinctively ducked, just before thousands of soft puffs of white popcorn exploded from the tube into their midst. The children held out their hands to catch the falling fluff, crying out in delight

as the manna rained softly down on their heads.

"My believers eat, but my haters shall not," Amen-Hopen shouted. "Bring me the cattle of my enemies."

To stage left, a man dressed in jeans and a western shirt stood, with a small calf at the end of a rope. The man led the calf up the side stairs to the stage, accompanied by 'moos' from the crowd. D'jedi rolled a large wooden box out to center stage, where Amen-Hopen opened the front of the colorful box to stab and twirl his rod inside, before motioning for D'jedi to turn the box. At each quarter-turn, Amen-Hopen opened a side and demonstrated to the audience, with his rod, that the box was empty.

"Bring me the calf," Amen-Hopen ordered the cowboy, opening the side of the box. The cowboy, holding a tin of sweet feed, led the encouraged calf into the box. Amen-Hopen closed the box, uttering sacred words while circling his staff above it.

"Open the box."

D'jedi opened the box, and the mystified crowd whistled and applauded when they discovered it was empty.

"Where did the little cow go?" a dismayed girl in the front row asked, but then a loud bellow from inside the empty box answered her.

"Don't worry, little one, he calls to you from the spirit world!" Amen-Hopen deadpanned, motioning for D'jedi to remove the box quickly backstage. "Is the magic manna to your liking?" he shouted to the audience.

"Yes!" the crowd roared.

"More salt," a heckler called out.

"More butter," another wit added.

"A plague on both your houses," Amen-Hopen cried out. "Flies will chase you from your homes like the ingrates you are."

The crowd was laughing at the quick exchange, when a distraught D'jedi returned, rushing forward from the wings of the stage.

"Great Amen-Hopen! News from the palace: the king's daughter has perished suddenly. The princess is dead!"

"What?" Amen-Hopen cried. "It cannot be. Bring her still warm body quickly to me, and I will call on the gods to restore her."

D'jedi came forth with his three brethren carrying Karen's limp body to center stage.

"Lay her there and tie her jaw so her soul cannot escape through any part in her lips. Bring me the sacred cloth of resurrection," Amen-Hopen directed, "and quickly, my spell-book."

Amen-Hopen knelt over the princess, positioning her limbs at her side, straight and tight together. The priests of Anubis returned with a heavy book and a large white cloth. Amen-Hopen handed the cloth to the front row of the audience, for their inspection.

"Examine it so you will know it is my great magic that raises the girl, and not any power in the cloth."

Members of the audience inspected the cloth and handed it back to Amen-Hopen. He held the cloth in front of the princess, covering her with it, before beginning his recitations to invoke the help of the Egyptian gods. Slowly, steadily, the princess' body rose from the floor. The crowd gasped in wonder and awe, but Amen-Hopen expressed a sudden concern. He snatched away the cover and held it in front of the princess as the priests converged.

"Do not be amazed," he scolded the audience. "It is only her body you see rising. I invoked the gods to raise her body, but failed to ask them to restore her life. We must strap her down, or her body will continue to rise until it floats off into the night."

Anubis' priests rolled the splendid sarcophagus alongside Karen, before lifting her limp body into the box. Her right arm fell to her side, and the busy priests lay it back on her chest, before lowering her in and strapping her down.

"Close the lid so her body will not take flight, and take her to the altar while I prepare the rites," Amen-Hopen ordered. "I must beseech the gods with my deepest magic for her life."

The priests of Anubis carried the closed sarcophagus to the altar, while Amen-Hopen recited passages from the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

"The spell calls for the burning of the physical body," Amen-Hopen declared. "Bring me the amphorae of sacred oils so we can properly prepare her body for the ritual."

D'jedi returned with the requested vials of oil, while Amen-Hopen reopened the sarcophagus and set circlets of copper on the pelvis and torso of the lifeless princess. He placed copper bands with circlets over her neck and forehead, filling each circlet with oil. Touching his staff's flame to each circlet in turn, he ignited jets of fire, which rose up from the body.

Watching from the audience, Jo stretched her neck to witness Mike's mysterious theatrics. The flames burned with extravagant hues of green and red and blue, beautiful to behold on the darkened stage. When all the circlets were lit, seven flames burned steadily from the body of the princess, and appreciative 'oohs' and 'aahs' escaped the open mouths of the crowd.

Jo felt someone patting her left hand gently, and she turned to find her mother staring at her, with vacant eyes and a wide smile. A red amulet around her mother's neck glowed fiercely in the red moon's light.

"I have such good news dear," she said. "Ted and I are back together, and he chose you for the ceremony."

Jo could only manage a weakened gasp as a pair of bony hands swiftly reached over her shoulders and returned the missing red amulet to her breast. When the amulet touched her skin a paralysis came over Jo, so powerful that she was unable to utter a word. She heard Ted Whitson's voice in her ear, as if she was faraway.

"Good girl," Whitson whispered, "you like the feeling,

don't you? Come with me. I have a surprise for you."

Jo found her awareness floating just above her body, like a lightly tethered helium balloon, watching with helpless detachment, as Ted's insistent hand propelled her through the crowd. Her mother happily waved good-bye, as Jo was prodded to walk stiffly out the exit towards the midway lot. Poppie, Jeremy, Moose, Mr. Scott, a girl in a blue dress and the remaining five Nephilim followed Whitson and herself in procession. Mr. Blackthorne waited for the group near the midway entrance, standing with his legs apart between two facing columns of silent Blackthorne Youth. His leathery neck turned his hideous face towards an attentive Blackthorne Youth squad leader.

"No one passes through your lines except on my orders, understood?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant rasped, "you can count on me, sir."

Blackthorne halted the advancing procession. He peeled back Mr. Scott's unblinking lid and touched his eyeball, satisfied at the lack of any reaction from Scott, he then ran his wrinkled hands over Jo's hair and face. She was relieved that her awareness, entirely removed from any of her body's physical sensations, could not feel his scaly touch. It was as if she was watching the scene from a distance that widened with each passing moment.

"Excellent, the stones are at peak power, and have deadened the subjects' sensory organs. The failure of Gaines

and Bolger to produce the Miller boy is deplorable, and I will deal with those dim-witted weaklings myself, after the ritual. The Munro girl's body should serve very well," he coughed.

Blackthorne withdrew a fan of folded papers from his inside coat pocket, and stuffed them aggressively into Mr. Scott's jacket. "As you suggested, we will sign these over your dead body, Commissioner Scott. Everyone, follow me! The full eclipse is approaching."

Blackthorne swept to the front of the line like a drum major, he and his followers brushing past a large indignant woman at the ticket booth.

"This carnival is closing," Blackthorne announced. "Bob, let the people know."

Bob, residing in Leslie's body, grabbed a thick hank of the ticket woman's hair, pulling her headfirst from the booth, before seizing the P.A. microphone.

"Get your things together," Bob-Leslie shouted over the announcement system. "Your doom is coming soon. The carnival is closing, NOW! Please flee quietly for your lives."

Leslie's chilling shriek frosted the loudspeakers so dramatically that the baffled midway crowd looked to the dark sky for signs of their doom. A few hardy souls in the tense crowd laughed, but most grabbed the hands of their children and made for home. The sturdy lines of Blackthorne Youth funneled the crowd towards the exits. A

gang of four carnies bristled up to Blackthorne and the Nephilim.

"Say, what's going on here, Mac?" a large squint-eyed carney challenged. "This carnival don't close unless we say so, and we ain't saying so."

Blackthorne ignored his speaking device, electing to command through the capstone of his staff:

"The carnival is over, MAC!" Blackthorne warned. "LEAVE!"

Blackthorne's thick words slammed the carney between his eyes, dispatching him backwards, staggering and falling, onto his heavy bottom, as if slugged by a sucker punch. His friends hoisted his mountainous frame, and dragged him towards the exit, looking back at Blackthorne with frightened eyes. Pointing his staff at the portable power plant, dubbed Genny, Blackthorne directed a crackling bolt of electricity, shot from the snake's eyes, into the generator's casing. Genny immediately fell silent. The midway and stage areas went dark as burnt books. Blue flames propagated along Genny's power casings, growing like spines on a dragon's tail, racing into the booths, sideshows and carnival rides. The booth attendants and ride jockeys fled the lot as one panicked body. When the lot was empty, the flames flickered and died.

The glowing red capstone on Blackthorne's staff acted as a beacon for the Nephilim and their captives, as he led them towards the dark outline of the Ferris Wheel. Blackthorne

knighted several rides with his staff as he passed, and these amusements sprang to life, driven entirely by the unholy power of his touch. Blackthorne paused to consider the merry-go-round, before speaking to his motley band.

"Place the humans I chose for you on this rotating whimsy. I will direct your energy transfers from the top of the Ferris Wheel, after I have enacted my own transfer."

The Nephilim paired with their selected victims, on the backs of lions and fish and bears, sitting in behind their prisoners, gripping the stainless poles. Blackthorne placed his hand on the small of Jo's back, directing her forward to the Ferris Wheel, Leslie clacking three steps behind, in blue high heels. Ted Whitson, puffing up his chest, stopped, clenched his fists and cleared his throat.

"Hey, Blackthorne, have you forgotten about me?" he snarled. "You promised me immortality, in any body I chose. I chose the Munro girl. You chose Peter Miller's body, and it's not my fault that he's not here. I delivered, and now it's your turn to deliver, *comprende amigo?*"

Blackthorne halted, but he did not turn around.

"An oversight on my part, Mr. Whitson, pardon me. Are you wearing your ring?"

"Yes, right here on my pinkie," Whitson said confidently, holding up his right fifth finger. "You insisted that we do the soul transfers tonight, so let's do it. I'm ready."

"Yes, let's do it. I shall fulfill my bargain, and reward you with a lovely immortal body."

Blackthorne whirled about, aiming his staff at Whitson's chest. A sudden stream of fiery plasma flashed from the snake's eyes, lifting Whitson's body a half-foot off the ground; his hat ignited, blasting off his flaming head, as his trembling arms flipped and flopped helplessly. Snatching back on the plasma stream, Blackthorne drew Whitson's feathery soul from his burning body, like a fly-caster hooking a trout.

"What use are you to me, Whitson?" Blackthorne asked, with slow deliberation, counting each word. "You have already legally willed everything to the Munro girl, and she alone is useful to me. Her beauty, her possessions, her mother's possessions - all will be mine. Even your possessions will be mine. Such conceit! Did you really believe I would allow your trickery?"

Blackthorne held Whitson's whipping soul aloft for a moment, at the plasma's tip, like a flag on a pole, before flinging it into the carousel's effigy of a mermaid. Whitson's useless charred body plopped to the ground, his nose busting like an overripe melon. Blackthorne twirled his staff twice, causing the carousel to spring to life, merrily piping a lively tune, whirling its offbeat riders in dizzying circles.

"Enjoy your travels, my friend. I expect you will journey far and wide as part of the carnival."

The leather soles of Blackthorne's scuffed shoes scraped the grit beneath his feet, as he turned to face the Ferris Wheel. Blackthorne gloried in the moment, stretching his

arms expansively upwards, as if he were attempting to gather in the luminous tungsten sky. If his glassy eyes had been capable, he would have shed tears as abundantly as the Nile's waters.

"The Summation has arrived. My power is supreme. Out of all the infinite possibilities in this living universe, I see my destiny completed here. I need only rise to the top of this fateful wheel and make this world mine."

22

THE FERRIS WHEEL

IN THE MOMENTS BEFORE GENNY'S demise, Peter knelt in the cramped darkness below the stage, restlessly turning the crank handle in the soft ground. He lifted its end to blow and sweep the dirt off. Occasionally he looked up at the bottom of the stage, when he heard thumps and muffled voices above, but he could only wait in silence for his appointed time of action. The ordained moment arrived with the heavy clunk of the sarcophagus above him.

Peter bolted into action, removing the false floor, and fitting the crank into the shaft. It turned easily and the mannequin rotated up and away, while Karen came slowly and evenly into view. He secured the shaft with the cotter pin. Suspended in mid-air by leather straps, Karen's dark hair fell forward, grazing his cheeks. Thick black eyeliner and mascara highlighted the dark beauty of her eyes, and the sweet fragrance of sandalwood escaped her flaxen hair. A mysterious arousal coiled up Peter's spine, as his tingling hands untied the linen cloth securing Karen's jaw.

"We're alone now," she said. "You're next."

It was as if Karen breathed a hermetic spell on Peter with her words: 'You're next'. Peter impulsively pressed his lips to hers, a full and deep kiss, one that shared the surprise and joy of their natural romantic chemistry, mingling an innocence and passion both would remember ever after.

"Peter, I'm at a disadvantage," Karen murmured softly. His forceful kiss had taken her breath and sense away. "You have me upside down and strapped in, and blood is rushing to my head. I only meant that you're next to do your part."

"My part. Your head," gasped Peter. "I need to put the bands around your head and neck, and remove your dress."

"Go to it, I guess," Karen said with amusement, "but I feel a little awkward about it now."

Peter snatched her unsullied white gown off, to reveal the scorched duplicate underneath. He stuffed her original gown in his duffel, before fishing the gold bands out of the box, and placing them carefully on her brow and throat.

"My neck is getting tired. Can you help hold up my head?"

"Sure thing. I guess we just wait now."

"I have to say, I had more fun down here than I expected."

"I'm sorry, something just came over me."

"I didn't mind, really. Try me again another time."

"Now? Again?"

"Peter! No, not *now or again*. Some *other* time, please."

They felt the sarcophagus rock slightly, smiling together

as they listened to Mike's theatrical incantations.

Behind the stage they heard the heavy skirting move, followed by the unmistakable sound of ripping fabric.

"What's that?" Karen asked with alarm. "Do you smell smoke?"

"Maybe, but that ripping noise we heard wasn't on stage. It came from behind us and outside. I better check."

"Wait, the signal light is on. Tie my jaw shut, like it was when I came down. We have less than a minute, hurry."

Peter hastily tied Karen's jaw shut, removed the cotter pin, and cranked furiously to send her topside. When Karen rotated up, the mannequin flipped over, and a few sputtering flames dropped in the grass. Peter quickly aimed the extinguisher blast at the little blazing pans, sweeping the foam side-to-side, but then a second insistent scuffle of noise behind the stage drew his attention. He scuttled from the enclosure to investigate, neglecting to replace the cotter pin that held the crankshaft steady and in place.

Karen was looking up at the black lid and listening to Mike's incantations, when she suddenly felt the table wobble uneasily, threatening to roll and flip her upside down again. She instantly realized the crankshaft wasn't locked, but the gag muffled her calls. Her only option was to lie rigid as a corpse.

Peter grabbed his duffel before pushing the draped flap open, and immediately recognized Conrad Bolger in his Blackthorne Youth uniform, holding a lit torch to the

skirting. The red stone on Conrad's ring finger pulsed eerily.

"I thought we were going to have to smoke you out, but we finally caught you out of your hidey-hole," Conrad sneered. "You're coming with us, punk."

Uttering an animal snarl, Conrad lunged. Peter whopped his ribs with the duffel, before balling his fist and delivering a hard right hand that caught Conrad heavily on the chin. Conrad wilted and dropped. Flames licked at the skirting, and when Peter turned to grab the extinguisher from beneath the stage, he nearly bumped heads with an on-rushing Deck Gaines. Deck grabbed him and they fell to the ground wrestling; Peter seized Deck's right arm and held it frozen, while pounding his nose and mouth. Deck released his hold and they parted with a swift rustle, eyeing each other and breathing heavily.

Peter's years of ring experience in PAL gave him the boxing advantage. He tested Deck with his left and circled, before smashing Deck's cheek with a looping right. Deck rushed him, burying his heavy shoulder into Peter's chest and forcing him to the ground. Peter twisted free, rolling and scrambling in the dry grass to regain his footing. He locked Deck's head with his left arm and began winding hard punches to Deck's face.

A second pair of arms wrapped around Peter's neck, pulling him backwards, proof that Conrad was back in the fight. Peter held on to Deck's head with both arms, and hurtled himself backwards into Conrad. The combatants fell

into a heap, with Conrad at the bottom, and Peter sandwiched between. Peter's headlock was solid and Deck could not free himself.

"Do something, Conrad! He won't let go!"

Conrad began groping for Peter's eyes to gouge them, while biting his right ear. Peter knew he could not let go of Deck to fend off Conrad, so he bit Conrad's searching hand and clamped down. Conrad yowled in pain, releasing Peter's bloody ear. Peter heard the clatter of his bag emptying, felt something buzz by his face and thud into Conrad's head, causing Conrad to go limp. Peter relaxed when he heard Grease's soft voice.

"Let go of the other one, Chum. I have him."

Rolling away, Peter released Deck. Grease clobbered Deck with a hardball to the back of his head, the blow folding him face forward into the grass. Peter raced to the extinguisher, sweeping the fire, but when the canister sputtered empty he couldn't be sure he'd fully contained it.

"The men you told me to watch left with Commissioner Scott," Grease informed him. "Your friend Jo was with them, and they all marched towards the midway. The guys in uniforms have the midway surrounded, and wouldn't let me through."

Peter ran to the wings of the seated audience. Grease followed him, running smack into his two glowering uncles, who escorted him back to his seat. Peter scanned the audience for Jo and Commissioner Scott, and found neither.

On stage, Amen-Hopen rapped the sarcophagus several times with his staff.

"She's not restored yet," Amen-Hopen frowned. "I pray the gods return her to us!"

A few people in the crowd laughed nervously while Amen-Hopen prayed and thumped. Mike's thumping of the lid immediately woke Peter to the realization that Karen should have already risen from the sarcophagus. He dashed back to his dark lair, ripping away the heavy drapery and diving under the stage. He found Conrad's lit torch lying in the grass beneath the stage, its flames bellowing and tasting the stage floor. Peter pulled the linen from Karen's clamped jaw.

"Thank God you're here!" Karen said excitedly. "You forgot to replace the pin, and the table flipped. When I didn't appear Mike slammed the lid shut, and he's been stalling ever since. Roasting on a spit is not the way I want to go!"

"I'm so sorry, but there was trouble backstage and I had to go. Mike will get you out, up there."

Peter cranked Karen up from the black pit a second time, replacing the cotter pin to secure the drive shaft, before scrambling outside. He dashed around the edge of the stage, brusquely shoving through the gasping crowd, pointing at the flames shooting through the backstage curtains.

A chilling shriek from the midway P.A. system sent an alarmed murmur rippling through the crowd. Amen-Hopen coolly ignored the shriek, directing his priests to open the

sarcophagus and unbind the princess. The beautiful princess rose from her tomb, stepping forth with a graceful sweep of her arm. The crowd applauded and whistled. Karen, Mike and the priests clasped hands, bowed to the crowd, and immediately fled for their lives, leaping off the front of the stage into the startled front row seats.

"Mommy, the princess is alive!" the obsessively worried little girl announced. Peter joined the crowd gathered around the resurrected princess, making his way to her side for a long hug.

"My hero," Karen whispered. "You came back for me."

"Princess Karen," Peter breathed in her ear, "please don't ever tell Mike I forgot the pin."

Mike pushed through the surrounding crowd of priests and confronted Peter.

"What happened? The stage is on fire and the trick was nearly ruined. Where were you?"

"Deck and Conrad mugged me, but they're knocked out behind the stage. They started the fire."

"For real? You knocked 'em both out?" Mike exclaimed. "You're a destroyer and a bomber!"

"I had more than a little help from Grease," Peter admitted, wiping away blood dribbling from his right ear. "Grease has uncanny mojo for being in the right place at the right time. He followed Blackthorne and the Nephilim to the midway. They took Mr. Scott and Jo with them."

The crowd drew back as the fiery statues of Horus and

Ra crashed to the stage. The steady background hum of the midway's dynamo fell suddenly silent, and the stage flattened into darkness. Scattered cries escaped the nervous crowd, as it reasoned with itself to stay steady, or break and run in full bucking panic. Ataninnuaq's reassuring voice stilled the crowd.

"Remain calm," he called out, as he sliced away a large section of privacy fabric between two posts, with his bone knife. "There is nothing to fear from darkness and fire. You have all seen both, many times before. Walk slowly and follow the princess to safety. Her white dress is easy to see."

"I'll stay and help my grandfather here," Karen said. "You guys go help Jo. I'll find you later, on the midway."

The orderly crowd gravitated silently to Karen's luminescent dress, following her from the area. Peter led Mike to the drowsy pair at the rear of the stage.

"The Blackthorne Youth have the midway surrounded," Peter said. "We'll need Conrad and Deck's uniforms to sneak in."

The pair confiscated Conrad and Deck's khaki shorts and shirts, before trussing the hoodlums in fence fabric, and dragging them a heavy stone's throw away from the inferno.

"The fire's intense," Mike said, as he stuffed his Amen-Hopen outfit in the duffel bag. "My street clothes are gone, but luckily Ataninnuaq's weapons are part of my costume. If we have any trouble with the sentries, we'll use the war club and your bat."

The crisply outfitted teens walked coolly to the midway entrance, where Mike confidently approached the squad leader on duty.

"Mr. Blackthorne gave orders, he wants this baseball equipment for the Initiation Ceremony. He ordered us to hurry it up."

The squad leader warily examined the bag, before noticing the Captain's stars on Deck's shirt collar.

"Just following orders, sir," the squad leader saluted. "You can go ahead."

Passing through the cordon of recruits, Mike and Peter entered the barren midway. Tinny music wound its way through the abandoned food carts and bottle toss games. The Ferris Wheel suddenly lit up, its thousand lights glowing an unnatural red, like a gigantic bloody bicycle wheel at the scene of an accident, slowly turning. Creeping by the tarp covering of the Lobster Boy and Mer-Woman sideshow, they took in the eerie merry-go-round, revolving with its silent riders.

"They're not riding for fun," Mike whispered. "This business has something to do with the Summation soul transfer Karen talked about in trance. I'll bet the answer is at the top of that glowing Ferris Wheel. Come on."

The teens dashed across the cinder gravel of a gaming booth alley, to get closer to the wheel, creeping the last ten feet to the edge of the FunHouse. Working the control levers of the Ferris Wheel, Leslie looked skyward to the bucket

holding Jo and Blackthorne, their silhouettes standing out against the blood red moon.

"She's trying to hold them steady at the very top," Mike surmised, reaching into Peter's duffel and pulling out his war club. "I'll stop her. Keep an eye out for me, I'm going."

Mike sprinted the fifteen yards separating him from Leslie, hurtled over the admission gate and tackled her in full stride, tumbling both of them into the gray grit.

"Mike, what do you think you're doing? Leave me alone!" Leslie shouted, struggling to her feet. "Let me go!"

In the dark of the wheel's tower, Mike pinned Leslie against a strut. She fought with him briefly, but Mike held her. Out of breath and resistance, she looked deeply into his dark eyes.

"Oh, Mike, how could I know you cared so much? Screw the neighbors! Kiss me."

"I wouldn't kiss you if you were the last girl on earth, Bob," Mike said, crowning Leslie's head with his war club. "Dumb-ass."

Mike removed the red-jeweled ring from Leslie's finger, and called Peter to bring his duffel bag. He dug the fox fur from the bag, swaddled Leslie's unconscious body in the fur and waited with the spirit-catcher. Seconds later, a blue shimmering orb rose from Leslie's chest, spinning like a dynamo into the net.

"Wow, this spirit-catcher works like a charm," Mike exclaimed. "Help me find something to lock up Bob."

"So that's what they look like!" Peter exclaimed. "They really are blue aliens!"

The sparking orb shocked Mike's fingers, and he dropped his captured bundle. The globe brushed aside the loose netting, escaping into the midway. Mike chased the light twenty yards, before it sped into the Tunnel of Love's gigantic mouth.

"Dang!" Mike exclaimed, stopping at the entrance. "I got too excited. I didn't have the net all the way tight."

He returned to lift Leslie's limp frame from the ground, and her wide brown eyes opened.

"Mike DeSorcier?" Leslie looked around in confusion at the crisscrossing spars and great machinery. "Where am I?"

"You had a hard knock on the head, and you've been out of it for a while. Everybody's been looking for you."

"Really? What's this? A fur?" Leslie was really looking at Mike for the first time. She'd always been a little curious about him, but he was a year behind her at school, and..."It's beautiful, but we don't know each other that well, do we?"

"No, we don't know each other very well, and about the fur...I need it back. We're at a carnival, but it's sort of closed and dangerous right now. We've got to get you somewhere safe. Chum, take Leslie to the FunHouse while I try to stop this crazy Ferris Wheel."

While Mike experimented with the levers, Peter escorted Leslie, by way of the shadows, to the FunHouse. Mike found that pushing the left handle forward caused a

backwards movement to the halted buckets. In the instant the buckets jolted, a tall dark figure fell from the dizzying top of the Ferris Wheel, rushing to the ground and thudding into the dust, with a sickening finality. Mike shifted the lever to the neutral position, and scrambled from the operator's station to examine the broken body. It was Blackthorne.

"Mike! Chumbucket! Get me down!"

Jo's voice at the top of the stalled wheel commanded Mike to return to the operator's levers. After some brief experimentation, according to Jo's frightened screams, he smoothly launched the wheel into motion. Jo bounded out of the seat to give Mike a hug.

"What happened?" Mike asked. "How did you get away from Blackthorne?"

"I didn't. He leaned out of the bucket to see why the wheel stopped, and I pushed him over the side."

Jo's necklace glowed brightly in the red moon. She calmly shoved her toe into Blackthorne's inert body, prodding it with the snake staff in her right hand.

"I guess he's dead," she said.

Mike puzzled over the reappearance of the stone at Jo's breast, but the sudden unexpected baying of a hundred hounds interrupted his thoughts, and their postmortem probe of Blackthorne's broken body. Mike and Jo ran towards the commotion, Peter joining them as they ran. The trio witnessed a determined pack of dogs racing through the

clumsy arms and stumbling legs of the Blackthorne Youth sentries. The frothing pack skittered across the midway's loose gravel, careening around the Tilt-A-Whirl before leaping on the spinning carousel.

Barking dogs were everywhere, snapping at the Nephilims' trousers, and tugging at their cuffs to pull them down from their carousel mounts. A red dachshund latched on a pants leg, swinging merrily around as the Nephilim kicked and wheeled to get him loose. A bloodhound chased his quarry from the carousel, and the fleeing ghoul somersaulted into the air when he missed clearing the rhinoceros. Three mutts were on him in an instant, tearing at his coat sleeves, as he threw his arms in the air. Mike spotted Karen running with the stragglers at the rear of the pack, and he called to her.

"My grandfather is in vigil, rounding up every loose mutt in town," Karen shouted, grinning with obvious pleasure. "More are on the way."

"Revenge of the hounds!" Mike laughed.

Jo's eyes narrowed and went dark. Raising her right arm, she extended Blackthorne's staff into the charged air, its capstone releasing a crackling bolt of blue lightning that lit the sky. A sudden savage wind kicked up, a cyclone of tremendous force, chasing wet leaves and dirt into a halo of debris that swirled angrily around the carousel. The spinning platform lit up, as if on fire, and the carousel began twirling faster and faster. Dozens of whimpering dogs flew

off the racing disc, rolling away like umbrellas in the wind. Mike lunged to seize the staff, but Jo quickly swung the rod away, leveled it at his chest, and discharged a bolt that slammed him to the ground. She snapped her wrist, and Mike's back arched in the plasma.

"Jo, what are you doing?" Peter yelled above the wind, whacking the staff from her hand, and severing the energy bolt. "Blackthorne's staff is dangerous! Let me have it."

Simultaneously, Jo and Peter lunged for the staff's opposing ends, lifting it from the gravel and wrestling for its control.

"Chumbucket, you have no right!" Jo screamed. "It's mine!"

Peter's eyes went wide in recognition of the moment.

His right hand seized Jo's wrist like a clamp, bending it back. She twisted and tugged, but her hand could not move in his grasp.

"Jo has never called me Chumbucket in her life. She hates that nickname."

Jo stung Peter's face with a hard slap, but his hold was unwavering. He stepped forward, wrapping her in a tight bear hug, crushing her to his chest. She stamped on Peter's foot, twisting and throwing herself side-to-side like a bucking bronco, furiously straining to break his hold. A bolt of fire shot from the snake-eyed staff, igniting the FunHouse. The blasting wind fed the fire, spreading it quickly across the roof. A girl's screams escaped the burning

building, adding to the cacophony of calliope music, storm, barking, and shouting. Attending to a woozy Mike, Karen helped him sit up, watching in amazement as Jo and Peter rolled like warring cats in a sack. Mike wiggled Karen's wrist to get her attention.

"Leslie DeBrulle's in the FunHouse," he said weakly. "Run and see if you can help her."

"The girl missing since May?" Karen asked in bewilderment. "What's going on? Why are Jo and Peter fighting?"

"Because it isn't Jo he's fighting, it's Blackthorne," Mike groaned, struggling to his feet, to join the tangle for control of the staff. "Go! Help Leslie, hurry!"

Karen left her battling friends, and raced for the burning two-story FunHouse. Gaudy paintings of whacky clowns, cuckoo birds and crazy clocks blistered and bubbled on the heated plywood walls. Karen threw open the entrance door and screamed when a white jester face in a red circus top hat sprang out at her. The grotesque jester wobbled and sagged on its spring, before recoiling into its box. Karen held to a railing as she approached a walkway over a dark pit.

"Leslie?" Karen called out, with uncertainty. "I'm a friend from school. I'm here to help you."

"Please hurry," Leslie's faint and frightened voice echoed. "I'm lost in a room of mirrors! Everywhere I turn is wrong!"

As Karen advanced into the darkened phantasmagoria, a row of colored lights suddenly lit up, illuminating a painted rotating cylinder at the walkway's end. Karen's feet slipped, but she pressed her palms lightly to the revolving tube for balance, and stumbled her way slowly through the pipe, exiting into a room of blue-green shadows. Tilting floors and uneven walls disoriented her, but she eventually found a hidden passage in the shape of a large mouse-hole to crawl through. The arched tunnel dumped her into a curious open room of endless halls, where circus animals seemed to roam through the wilderness of a mirrored maze.

"Stay where you are," Karen said to the mirrors. "I'll find you."

Starting into the maze Karen chose the strategy of keeping her right hand on the nearest wall, and even entering blind alleys she eventually found her way to the next hall. Above the groaning sound of the buckling roof, she heard Leslie crying in fear at the insistent snap and pop of the fire. A hole appeared in a ceiling panel, dripping flames that seared the floor, and multiplied endlessly in the mirrors. Weeping smoke oozed into the rooms, and when Karen heard a collapsing wall of mirrors shatter behind her, she quickened her pace forward.

Karen finally discovered a fetal Leslie, cowering with her hands covering her disheveled hair. Consoling her softly, Karen lifted Leslie up at her armpits, and led her out by the hand. Leaving the mirrored hall, Karen maintained

her right turn strategy, entering a passage that forced them to slide down a metal sheet, to the first floor. Pinwheel circles twirled and whistles tooted, but Leslie's wailing bawls were what unnerved Karen the most.

A hall of horrors produced Jack the Ripper, disemboweling a victim, and his bloody grin brought another horrible shriek from Leslie. Moths of flame were eating at The Ripper's clothes when Karen finally found the barely lit exit, just beyond a wall of smoke and whipping flames. She dashed for the opening, pulling Leslie through into the night air. Leslie's wild hair was sizzling and smoking, and Karen dusted her smoldering locks with handfuls of sand and gravel. "We're safe," Karen rejoiced, wiping soot from Leslie's cheeks. "We look a fright, but I think the worst is behind us."

Leslie suddenly screamed and ran, pointing to Karen's rear-end. Karen looked behind and discovered her gown peppered with fiery embers. She dropped and rolled, but the tickling fires jumped between the gown's layers of light fabric, as the wind fanned their growth. Lying on the ground rolling and burning, Karen saw the Tunnel of Love and its river of water. She pushed herself up on her feet and ran for it.

Dashing across the cinders and up the wooden gangway, Karen raced past the chained boats, and through the gargantuan red plaster lips. She felt like a cartoon bear running to stick her flaming butt into a rain barrel. Inside

the tunnel's dark mouth, she jumped feet first into the canal, plunging forward up to her neck, dousing every part of her gown and quenching the fire.

Safe at last, Karen allowed herself to drift through the canal, her arms paddling slowly in the water. Her eyes searched the grotto's rough plaster, admiring the sculpted water imps and nymphs dancing and playing in the tunnel's dimly lit coves and recesses. She suddenly remembered her grandfather's warning about not going in water above her knees until summer was over, but she told herself that the summer was almost over, and that this wasn't a real river, only a make-believe creek, not more than four-feet deep. Karen found herself wishing she and Peter were submerged together in the dark cool water, and the comforting thought eased her fears. She felt a sense of relief and surprising contentment for the first time in weeks.

The light clink of a single chain link slipping into the water at the shadowy entrance startled Karen. The first clink was merely spooky, but the second and third were plain scary. The chain holding the swan boats began running freely to the canal's bottom, and it didn't halt there. It continued unwinding, and the swift sliding of each clinking link into the water chilled her. Karen knew this wasn't gravity grabbing a loose end of the chain, and going on a joy ride. The chain was swimming towards her with movements that were purposeful and unnatural. She gave a quick frog kick at the chain and tried climbing from the

water, but the boat chain whipped around her ankle and pulled her under. The cold heavy coils wrapped her thrashing thighs and struggling arms, tightening their grip.

Karen wrestled to free herself, managing to push her hand up to protect her windpipe. She fought to air several times, but the wicked heavy chain had an unforgiving grip on her, squeezing and dragging her below the surface, and along the slippery bottom, for longer and longer spells. Writhing and kicking beneath the surface, Karen watched the shadow of a swan boat float over her, as if a ferryman was coming to give her passage to the next world. She could not rise to air against the boat's flat bottom, and the swan sealed her fate. Karen always imagined crossing death's threshold would feel something like dropping off to sleep, but this crossing was lonely and full of shadows from the next world.

23

*T*HE *J*AR

MIKE FINALLY PRIED JO'S CLENCHED fingers from the rod, one at a time, and in his grasp the capstone flickered, reawakening the lights of the surrounding neighborhood. A distant roar of approval rose from outside the midway.

Jo's gnashing teeth snapped at Peter's shoulder, and her tongue violently cursed the night air, as they rolled and struggled in the gravel.

"Hold her tight while I get a few things," Mike said, and he dashed to the freak show tent, looking over the medical curiosity shelf for a long minute, before finally selecting a large specimen jar. Gathering up the fox fur and spirit-catcher, Mike sped back to an exhausted Peter.

"It's about time," Peter yowled. "You left me wrestling a gator in a dirt pit."

Mike draped the fur across Jo's shoulders, holding the spirit-catcher inches from her chest as she twisted in agony.

"I'll hunt you down, boy," Jo spat. "I'll see you torn limb from limb."

"Give it up, Blackthorne," Mike advised. "You're just mad because your Summation fizzled and your numbers didn't add up after all."

As the sizzling blue orb bloomed from Jo's chest, Mike was ready and waiting with the spirit-catcher.

"Let Jo loose, Chum, and open the specimen jar."

A coil of pale yellow flesh floated lifeless in the specimen jar's formaldehyde. Peter unscrewed the lid, nearly gagging on the strong odor.

"Careful," Mike said. "Hold it steady. It's almost impossible to catch lightning in a bottle."

Mike held the lid lightly over the fizzy energy ball, slowly slipping the spirit-catcher net free, to trap Blackthorne's essence in the jar. Peter screwed the lid tightly closed. Blackthorne's essence entered the creature's scaly flesh, and unwound its coils. One of the rattlesnake's two heads came to life and forcefully lashed out against the glass. Its lidless black eyes fixed with hatred on the gawking faces of Peter and Mike.

"You'll make a great exhibit, Blackthorne. Easily worth fifty cents. Now, how do I use your staff to get Jo back?" Mike asked, shaking the jar. The agitated snake thrashed furiously in the formaldehyde.

Leaves and dust rustled and swirled around Jo's cooling body. Mike's thumb searched the staff and it suddenly warmed to his grasp, fully powering on at the capstone. He wished he could return Jo to her body. A surge of blistering

red light instantly arced from the staff into the jewel at her breast. A wispy green mist rose out of the ruby, curling into her gently parted lips.

Jo drew in a deep breath, coughed. Her eyes fluttered and her fingers seized the amulet reflexively, before closing a grip around the stone. Jo's dormant body stirred. Mike held out the staff in awe, realizing he held the combined powers of science and magic in the palm of his hand. A broad smile spread across his face. He didn't have to understand the staff's inner workings for it to make sense of his intentions, and obey his commands.

"Oh, I'm so glad to be back," Jo whispered.

"You have a nasty temper when you're not yourself," Peter commented, holding out his hand to help her up.

"I had the strangest experience," Jo recalled. "I was at the top of the Ferris Wheel, wishing I could get away from that man, and a wind pulled me like a kite into the sky. I just kept rising into the air, higher and higher. I could see everything, like I was forty thousand feet in the air, in a real place. I was with my dad on a bright pink beach. The night sky and the ocean were dark and soft and beautiful."

"Sounds like a nice dream," Peter said.

"But it wasn't a dream. It was a very real to me, and I remember some of it, but mostly I remember appreciating the gift of time with my father," Jo said thickly.

Jo held the amulet in the gray moonlight, studying a small bright red flaw glowing in its center. Her watering

eyes ached, and she hoped her voice would not break. She turned the stone over to search for other unseen flaws. Jo's efforts to hold herself together failed, and stinging tears streamed down her hot cheeks.

"I feel so close to my father when I wear this stupid stone," Jo's voice broke. "A creep tricked me into wearing it, and everyone tells me it's a bad thing, but it connects me to my father. I don't want to lose him again."

"I think you should keep the necklace if you want," Peter said. "Maybe it's okay now. You just have to be careful with how you use it."

Peter cradled Jo with a hug, and she collapsed on his shoulder, releasing painful sobs of grief. After a few moments her tears subsided, and she leaned back wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Ted Whitson is the nastiest man I've ever met, and I just want to scream at my mother for ever bringing him into our house."

Mike wrapped the snake exhibit jar with the costumes and clothes stored in Peter's duffel. The scattered pack of dogs trotted and paced with panting tongues. A dozen or more picked up the scent trail of the fleeing Nephilim, and resumed the chase. The remaining Blackthorne Youth riders, Poppie, Jeremy, and Moose, traitors all, floated by on the slowly revolving carousel. Mike spotted Leslie running out of the midway's main gate and called out to her, but she didn't turn or stop running.

"There goes Leslie," Mike commented. "At least she's safe. Where's Karen?"

Peter's eyes regarded the FunHouse inferno, and suddenly widened. He immediately charged towards the flames. Jo and Mike lit up in alarm, chasing after him, calling out Karen's name in all directions with no response. The FunHouse belched fire from every window, as Peter ripped a sleeve off his Blackthorne Youth uniform, wrapping it around his hand to grab the hot handle of the door.

"Hold up, Chum," Mike hollered, "don't go in. Leslie was running for the main exit, so Karen must've got her out safely, and she must be okay, too. Look, here's a piece of her gown in the walkway, and more little pieces," Mike said, picking up the charred fragments. "It looks like she rolled in the gravel to put out the flames, but she got up and ran," Mike followed a trail of shoe-prints and charred flakes, "to the river in the Tunnel of Love!"

Mike pursued his lead up the gangplank into the dark tunnel. His astonished eyes caught sight of a heavy boat chain swishing and squirming from side to side in the channel. Peter and Jo rushed up behind him. Something or someone was struggling at the end of the boat chain, and Mike jumped in the water, grabbing the chain and pulling hard. He saw the shadow of an arm flail just below the water's surface.

"Chum, jump in and heave!" Mike yelled. "I think

Karen's under the boat!"

Peter splashed in behind Mike. A vicious tug-of-war began, with the chain sliding through their grasp like an oily snake, resisting their strongest efforts. Releasing its prey in the water, the deadly chain whipped around, quickly encircling Mike's wrists with its writhing coils. Jo dropped to her belly on the walkway, as the end hook of the chain whooshed over her head, and then she screamed a warning to Mike and Peter, as the hook swung around to clobber them from behind.

"Jo, grab its free end," Peter directed. "Wrap it around the guard rail as I feed it to you and don't let go!"

Working together - holding, pulling and wrapping the chains - they reeled the full length in. Mike seized the curved hook and pushed it into a link as Peter yanked the chain taut. Mike swam under the black swan to get to Karen, while Jo pulled on the chain's opposite end with all her strength.

"I have a tight hold," she yelled to Peter. "Help Mike and Karen."

Peter scrambled from the water to the service walkway, lifting Karen as Mike pushed her limp body up from the water. Peter laid her on the level platform, kneeling at her side.

"She's not breathing. Mike, get up here!"

"There's not enough room, and every second counts, Chum. You can do it. Head tilt, chin lift," Mike instructed

from the water. "Pinch her nose, seal her lips with yours and blow till you see her chest rise."

Peter tilted Karen's head back and lifted her chin with three fingers. He blew a good deep breath in, waited three seconds, and then gave another good breath. Karen turned her head and spit up water.

"Good," Mike said. "Lather, rinse, repeat. I feel her pulse. She's coming back. Keep going. I'll bring the boat back to float her out."

Karen ceased sinking into the river of forgetfulness. Dimly remembering her friends, she swam towards a light, and rose steadily to the surface. Swimming up from the depths of beckoning darkness, she abruptly broke the surface of consciousness, and touched a human hand. She found herself drifting lazily on a boat, her head laying in someone's lap, floating out of the darkness. Opening her mouth to speak, she went into a coughing fit, but finally managed to eke out a greeting.

"Hi," she said to Peter's smiling face, "you saved me again. Twice in one night, from fire and water."

"It was close both times," Peter smiled, "but we did it."

Peter lifted Karen from the boat, and carried her down the gangplank. Jo kept up her unrelenting hold on Bob's vain efforts to unwind and escape.

"I'll take it from here," Mike said, gathering the chain from Jo. "Karen probably has some water in her lungs, and she'll catch pneumonia if she doesn't get warm and out of

her wet clothes. Her original princess gown is in the duffel bag and it's dry. Tell Chum to come help me , while you help her change. We'll be down to you in a minute."

Jo relinquished her duty to Mike, found Karen's gown and ran down the boards. After sending Peter to Mike, Jo removed the warm wool letter jacket Grease had loaned her, to drape over Karen's cold shoulders. In the Tunnel of Love, Peter took control of the chain to allow Mike to prepare the snake staff and spirit-catcher.

"When I draw Bob out of the chain, throw the net over him and hold it closed. Ready?"

Peter nodded his head, pulling in another link. Mike thrust the staff at the coiled chain, concentrating on expelling Bob. A spark flew from the capstone to the chain, forcing a diffuse blue light to separate itself from the chain, and gradually coalesce into one shimmering sphere. The ball of light was imprisoned by the staff's charged stream.

"My hands are buzzing," Peter said. "Tell me when I can let go of the chain."

"You can let go; I have him. Drop the net over the sparkling ball, and then gather the nets loose ends tight."

Releasing the chain, Peter took up the spirit-catcher and stretched it taut, before quickly nipping into the charged stream, and surrounding Bob in the tightly gathered net.

"It's like capturing a flapping bird," Peter said. "He's trying to fly out."

Mike unlaced Peter's tennis shoe, and used it to tie the

mesh sack closed, before stuffing the glowing ball lightning into the duffel bag. He dug out his show costume, and Peter's original clothes. After changing out of the hated Blackthorne Youth uniforms, they marched down the gangplank to meet up with Jo and Karen. Mike looked like a wild man in his ragged Egyptian Magician robes.

"Karen's too weak to walk," Jo said. "Peter, you carry her, and I'll carry your bag."

"His bag is holding our captives," Mike said. "I'll carry it."

In one motion, Peter lifted Karen's legs and swung her up into the cradle of his arms. She held to his neck, occasionally coughing into his chest, for the journey out of the midway. The fire from the FunHouse had spread to engulf Blackthorne's corpse.

"Let him fry," Mike said. "The firemen who find him won't ask questions."

They continued on to the merry-go-round, arriving to find Ataninnuaq among a curious crowd gathered at the carousel. Ataninnuaq hugged their shoulders affectionately, folded Karen in his arms and carried her out the main entrance towards the warmth of the stage fire. Poppie, Jeremy, and Moose surrounded Peter and Mike, blabbering excitedly about the initiation ceremony.

"You guys are nuts," Mike said. "The Blackthorne Youth ended tonight and, as proof, you should go untie your friends Deck and Conrad. You'll find them, bound like two

mummies, about thirty yards behind the stage."

"We've got two men down," a man in the crowd announced. "Clancy Scott looks like he's coming around."

"This all came from a lightning strike," a neighboring man pronounced confidently. "I looked out the front window of my house, and the carousel and Ferris Wheel were glowing from all the electricity. The strike must've knocked these men down at the same time. You're a lucky man, Clancy."

Mr. Scott sat against the Tilt-A-Whirl fence, feeling the back of his scalp. Bringing his hand forward for examination, he noticed not only blood, but also a ring with a red jewel. He fanned his fingers, inspecting both the blood and the ring with a puzzled expression.

"I feel like a mule kicked my head," he said, "and from behind, no less."

"Is there a doctor here to check out Ted Whitson?" another man asked. "He doesn't look so good. He may need one of his own hearses. He feels stone cold dead."

"Let me look Whitson over," Mike yelled, running to the call. "I was once a Boy Scout!"

An unconcerned carney, chomping on a hot dog, stood over the hapless funeral director's body and splashed Whitson with his beer. Mike, looking like a witch doctor in his costume, examined Whitson with an air of genuine authority.

"He's not dead to a certainty," a woman behind Mike

said. "Bring him back, Mike. I've spent too much time investigating this fool to let him off this easy."

Mike recognized Madeline Hanson's voice, and he turned his head to her smiling face.

"Do something," Maddie insisted. "Poke him with that staff. I need someone to arrest."

Mike hid the capstone from view beneath his hand, and tapped Whitson's ring, with the thought to find and return Whitson's soul to his body. A red spark lit into the ring on Whitson's pinkie, and in the same instant, the carousel mermaid shivered. A jabbering Poppie bolted off her flank as if a ghost had flown past him. Whitson sputtered and rolled in the mud and gravel.

"It's a miracle!" the carney exclaimed.

"It's a miracle there's anyone left for me to arrest," Maddie corrected. She lifted Whitson with the carney's help and cuffed him immediately, before turning to address the carney. "Will you help me get this man into his car so I can drive him to the hospital?"

Maddie and the carney wrestled the bloodied and fricasseed Mr. Whitson into the back of his own black DeSoto, where the carney remained, while Maddie returned to interrogate Mike.

"Mike, I need a report. Tell me Blackthorne is gone for good."

"Lookee here," Mike answered, reaching into the duffel for the specimen jar. Maddie gasped, but then she inspected

the writhing two-headed snake with fascination. Mike brought out the net holding Bob. Maddie's finger poked the glowing ball through the mesh.

"It tickles," she said. "What is it?"

"My faithful assistant, Chumbucket, calls it a blue alien. If he'll open the specimen jar for me, we'll bottle lightning, just for you, a second time."

After Peter unscrewed the lid, Mike quickly covered the mouth of the jar with the spirit-catcher. He carefully worked the nets edges loose, covered the jar, and slid the net out. Bob's iridescent spirit tormented the thrashing snake, before entering the snake's second head. The conjoined heads hissed and struck out at one another when Mike shook the jar.

"Break it up, fellas," he scolded. "You've got to learn to get along if you're going to live together."

"My second day back on the job, and I land in this mess," Maddie mused. "Did I just witness a Nephilim?"

"That's my summation," Mike grinned.

"My superiors don't much like the supernatural theories I've been peddling," Maddie said.

"So you're back on duty?" Mike asked.

"Mr. Hoover himself called Los Angeles and demanded my return! With a pay raise! What do you make of that?"

"Maybe Mr. Hoover likes your work," Mike offered.

"Maybe," Madeline laughed. "Got anything else for me?"

"I did some sleuthing of my own while you were out of commission," Mike admitted. "I have a few large envelopes of evidence on Whitson, if you're interested."

"If unmarked envelopes happen to appear under my door, along with my missing files and keys, I won't ask where they came from. Say, I want to compliment your snazzy leopard outfit. You've got style and moxie, Mike DeSorcier. Ring me when you graduate college. There just might be a job at the FBI for someone like you. Best of luck and take care."

Maddie spoke briefly with the carney, and he nodded his head excitedly when she handed him the specimen jar and some folded cash from her purse. Mike and Peter waved as Maddie sped away with Whitson. The carney sauntered off in the direction of the crematorium, with the snake specimen jar in the crook of his arm.

Rejoining Karen, Ataninnuaq and Jo in front of the stage, Peter and Mike warmed themselves by the blaze, as if they were at a winter weenie roast. Mike discovered Leslie's frantic mother had somehow reunited with her frightened daughter at fireside. Mike didn't know what to say, and so he said nothing. He could only watch them huddle and cry, before Leslie stumbled off in her one blue shoe, towards her mother's Buick for the ride home.

Poppie, Jeremy and Moose returned, snickering about their recruiters, Deck and Conrad, running blindly home in their skivvies. Mike and Peter tossed their borrowed and

soaking wet Blackthorne Youth uniforms into the blaze. Moose and Poppie laughed and tossed theirs in also. Jeremy threatened to inform on them, and they answered his threat by wrestling his uniform off, and adding it to the burning pyre.

The impromptu bonfire's updraft sent sparks spiraling into the night sky, while the apocalyptic heat curled leaves in the nearby trees. Fire trucks showed up in time to sprinkle the fires, just before the FunHouse and the stage collapsed. Mike admired Blackthorne's black staff in the firelight.

"This staff is really cool, and Blackthorne sure doesn't need it anymore. It's like the lost staff of Hunga."

"Throw the rod in the fire," Ataninnuaq advised. "It is bad medicine."

"I think it's swell. It's easy to handle and cool looking."

"You will find the truth of it on your own, Mike. Karen, I have a lot of explaining to do to your mother. Jo, a squad car drove your mother home, so you should ride with us. We will see you two at the game tomorrow. Chimo."

Peter and Mike watched Karen, Jo and Ataninnuaq cross the parking lot.

"You should listen to Ataninnuaq, Mike. He knows what he's talking about."

"There's real magic in this stick, Chum, just like Udjuk."

"There's a difference between sticks and stones. Udjuk is helpful and that thing is destructive."

"I can control it. I think I'll keep it."

"Of course," Peter sighed.

Mike made use of the snake staff as a walking stick on their way home.

"Well, buddy, we saved the world tonight, and tomorrow we play for the World Series Championship. Can you believe it? I hope tomorrow is as exciting as tonight."

"I don't want any more excitement. I'll settle for a routine win."

The teens parted ways at Mulberry Street, Peter continuing south towards his house. Behind him, he heard the steadily diminishing echo of the clacking staff as Mike struck it to the sidewalk with every other step. The smell of fresh pies cooling in the kitchen greeted him when he opened his front door. Mr. Miller glanced at Peter over the top of his newspaper, and his hands collapsed the papers' folds into his lap.

"Have you had a look at yourself, son?"

Peter stretched out his tee shirt with both hands, quickly surveying his appearance. Grass, soot, cinder and blood stained the white tee. His red Keds were soggy and missing a shoelace; blood from his wounded ear caked his neck.

"I guess I do look pretty messy," he acknowledged. "Karen and I were goofing around, and we fell in the water at the Tunnel of Love."

Mr. Miller stared at his son dubiously.

"You're talking to a lawyer, son. Falling in the water doesn't explain a missing shoelace."

"Mike borrowed my shoelace."

"And the bloody ear? And the grass stains? There's no grass in the Tunnel of Love."

Peter sighed. He was too tired to hold up under his dad's withering interrogation.

"I got in a fight with two of the Blackthorne Youth, but they started it."

"The truth comes out, eventually. It sounds like you certainly made a case tonight for the campaign against juvenile delinquency. Anyway, I'm glad you're home safe. Get in the bath, quick, before your mother sees you."

"Are those pies I smell?" Peter asked.

"They're for the contest tomorrow at the ballpark. Don't eat any of them."

"Don't worry, all I want is to hit the sack."

"We're going over to the ballpark at eleven. Do you want to ride with us?"

"Maybe. I'll decide in the morning, right now I'm worn out."

"All right, see you in the morning."

Peter labored up to his room. After a long hot shower, he lay on his bunk entirely covered under a single sheet. He blew the sheet away from his face, repeatedly, while he thought about the wild night and the championship waiting for him the next day. Finally, he pulled all the covers up around his head, leaving only a small opening to breathe through. He woke once in the night, to the screaming of

The Summer Set

sirens racing to a three-alarm fire at Whitson's Funeral Home and Crematorium. When the blaring receded, he rolled back over, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

24

THE CHAMPIONSHIP

BFORE THE START OF THE next day's Bantam League Championship, Mike called the team into a close huddle, holding up his treasured gold coin for all to see.

"This coin belongs to the first runner to cross home plate today, but it needs a baptism," Mike said, flipping open his pocket knife. "Whoever gives me a drop of blood gets a Walking Liberty half-dollar."

"I want it," Reggie piped up.

Mike pricked Reggie's middle finger, squeezing out three drops of blood on the coin, before touching the coin with Blackthorne's snake staff. The team cheered, but Peter was aghast.

"You said yourself the Roswell pitcher has mojo," Mike reminded him. "We need to even the score. You've seen what this staff can do."

Peter dug his catcher's mask and shin guards out from the bottom of his duffel bag, knowing there was no sense in talking to a madman. Coach Lundsford entered the dugout,

looking down at the brilliant coin spotted with blood.

"What's going on here?"

"Just some team building exercises, Coach," Mike said.

The players wandered back to the bench. Coach Lundsford clapped his hands several times for attention.

"All right, let's play ball."

The first batter, Poppie, touched his middle fingers to the bright coin as he left the dugout. He promptly pelted the previously unhittable Grease with a single to left field. Subsequent batters followed Poppie's routine, and the Millionaire bench was on fire with team spirit, screaming and bellowing like wild beasts, their fingers clawing and rattling the dugout's chain-link.

Mike sat at the end of the bench wearing a satisfied grin on his face, until his best friend refused to duplicate Poppie's ritual. Peter came to the plate with two runners on base, but missed badly on Juan's squirrely pitches and struck out.

"The other guys were watching, and it hurt their morale for you not to follow ritual," Mike reprimanded him.

"It's moronic. Using that staff to influence the game's outcome is bad mojo. I just need to find a pitch I can hit. If Juan throws his Atomic Shake pitch, I might be able to get my bat on it."

Taking the field, a few of Peter's teammates grumbled as they pushed by him. The cool morning wind disappeared, but Mike's heater was working from the jump. He struck out the Roswell side on twelve pitches. As the game oozed into

the middle innings, locked in a 0-0 tie, Mike was working a perfect game.

Peter returned to the plate in the fifth inning and watched Juan carefully, waiting on the Atomic Shake pitch. It came on the third pitch, and Peter swung with all his might. The crowd fell silent at the solid crack of his bat, and then erupted in a great cheer as the ball sailed mightily over the center field fence. The flags on the outfield poles rejoiced in a newly fresh breeze.

As Peter rounded the bases, Grease smiled from the mound, tipping his hat. Peter's joyous teammates pounded his back as he returned to the dugout, sitting beside Mike at the end of the bench.

"Great hit, but you forgot the coin," Mike said. "You scored the first run. It's yours."

"No, it's yours. I don't want it."

Mike rose from his seat and snatched up the blazing offering. The sizzling coin scorched his fingertips, and he dropped it reflexively. The coin spun and wobbled, coming to rest on its side, against the steps, neither heads or tails. Mike picked it up with a rosin bag.

"This is Chumbucket's coin," Mike announced to the team. "Hoo-rah!"

"Hoo-rah!" the team responded, clapping as Mike returned to his seat.

"Damn, the coin burned the tips of my fingers. Get me a cup of ice, will ya?"

Peter dutifully retrieved a cup of rattling ice, handed down by a supporter in the stands.

"Way to smash it out of the park," the man grinned.

Mike stuck his injured fingers in the ice briefly, before returning to the mound with a 1-0 lead. Peter could see his pained expression after every pitch.

"Let me see your fingers," Peter insisted, when the inning was over. A huge and obviously painful water blister was forming on Mike's middle finger.

"It gets worse with every pitch. Don't tell Coach. I think I can hold it together one more inning."

"Maybe we should bring in a reliever to close out the game," Peter advised.

"I'll be okay. One more inning and we're the champions of the world."

Mike's fingers were barely into the ice before Grease retired the Millionaire hitters, forcing him back out to the field, in front of an intent sea of people, flags flapping in a restless breeze. He marshaled all of his power to strike out the first batter, and then fooled the next one with a disguised curveball. Two batters down. One more for a perfect game and a world championship.

Peter and Mike worked the next hitter carefully, but on the sixth pitch his bat splintered on Mike's fastball. Mike dodged the bat's flying pieces, and the ball hopped crazily over Poppie's glove. A solemn Mike turned and faced the outfield for a moment, hanging his head. Peter called time

and jogged to the mound. Mike had a faraway look in his eyes.

"You okay?"

"Déjà vu," Mike groaned wearily. "A broken bat single, for the thousandth time. It's like I'm a character in a book who's destined to lose. Every time a new reader opens the book, I lose again. My fingertips feel like they're on fire. I should walk off the mound right now, and let Tuck or Wally finish it, but that would be gutless."

A streak of powdered dust, caked in sweat, ran like a white plaster crack, down Mike's forehead. He shook with an involuntary chill that trembled and opened his weakening hand, dropping the ball to the dirt. Peter picked it up, without handing it back.

"Maybe you should call it a day, Mike. You look ashen and used up. Your heater is losing velocity. It's not too late."

Mike's clear eyes turned to face Peter.

"Are you kidding me? Leave the championship game with one out to go? And the opposing pitcher at the plate?"

"Maybe it's not meant for you to win today. If we bring in a fresh pitcher we probably win. If the team wins, we all win."

"Feelings aren't facts, Chum," Mike said, holding out his hand for the ball. "Let's end this thing. So let it be written, so let it be done."

Peter reluctantly placed the ball in Mike's hand and trundled back to the plate. Grease wiggled his bat intently,

waiting for Mike's pitch. The runner at first looked antsy and ready to take off. Peter called for an outside change-up, but Mike shook it off. He wanted the heater, and would have no other.

Peter settled in and held his glove out, waiting for a ball that never arrived. Grease's solid smack sent the ball to the outfield. Peter rose to watch Vince chase the fly to the right field fence. A puff of wind breathed just enough to push the ball over his outstretched glove, and beyond the painted plywood. The Williamsport team stood motionless in shocked disbelief. The Roswell players jumped and shouted like the winners of an impossible victory, which they were. The game was over: Roswell, New Mexico 2, Williamsport, Pennsylvania 1.

Peter jogged to Mike's side as he strode in from the mound. They sat together in the dugout, Peter removing his gear, while Mike soaked his fingers in ice.

"The wind sure was fickle today," Mike observed. He glanced suspiciously at the snake staff, tucked in the corner of the dugout. "I think that gust gave its last breath to spring Grease's ball free."

"We did our best. I think that last little whiff of wind signaled the end of summer. I always feel fall in the air, just before we go to the Jersey shore. You're coming along, right?"

"The shore? What about Karen? I thought you invited her."

"She's coming, and so is Jo. My parents wanted to thank them for helping with Oso. The girls are sleeping in one cottage and the guys in another. I didn't want to tell you before the championship, because you were already out of your mind with excitement."

"I'm in. I've already forgotten about the game."

"We better get back for the closing ceremonies. Coach is waving us over."

The awards announcer stood with his microphone on the pitcher's mound.

"The Award for Most Valuable Player in the tournament is presented to Juan Gris, pitcher for the Roswell, New Mexico team."

Grease stepped out from among his friends on the Roswell team, grinning like a possum as he accepted the award. He refused the bantering calls for a speech, instead waving agreeably to the assembled crowd, before melting back into a cheerful sea of yellow uniforms.

"The second individual award is for Sportsmanship. This year's recipient, Peter Miller, exemplifies the spirit of Bantam League Baseball."

Mike's staff pushed a shocked Peter away from the sheltering crowd, and he shuffled forward to accept his award, giving in to the requests for a speech.

"Thank you for the award," Peter said, and paused. A glimmer of the troubling dream of Jo and Mr. Scott, in a swamped rowboat, flashed before his eyes. He realized he'd

roused himself to action in time to help Jo, and now it was Mr. Scott's turn. "But I really think a more deserving recipient of the Sportsmanship Award is Commissioner Clancy Scott. Without him, there never would have been a Bantam League for any of us to celebrate. Thank you."

The mention of Clancy Scott's disgraced name dropped the crowd into sullen silence. The brainwashed townspeople still embraced the lies Blackthorne had fed the press all summer. Peter stepped down from the mound into the general uneasiness.

"Hoo-rah!" Mike shouted, clapping. His teammates joined, and then the Roswell team took up the applause, and it quickly spread through the crowd. The announcer waited for the cheering to die down before continuing with the team awards. At the end of the ceremonies, Grease approached Peter.

"What a fantastic home run. I wanted to congratulate you."

"I was lucky. You're really impossible to hit."

"It wasn't luck," Juan said. "You were sitting on that pitch."

"Maybe, and anyway I don't believe in luck as much as I used to. My friend Jo taught me to just say thanks when someone compliments you, so, thanks."

"De nada. Would you like me to take your stone back with me for repair? We are flying home in a few hours. I will send it back in one piece if you give me your address."

Peter considered the matter briefly, before pulling Udjuk from his pocket and handing him to Juan.

"His name is Udjuk. Let me get a pen and I'll write my address down for you."

Peter found his family next to their car in the parking lot.

"Can I borrow a pen?" Peter asked his dad.

"Sure, but you guys hurry along. We're all starving, and your mom wants to take a picture of Mike and you with the Land camera."

Peter wrote down his address and returned to find Mike smiling and laughing with Juan and Billy the Kid.

"It's been swell getting to know you both," Peter said. "It was a great game. Good luck in the future."

Mr. Scott, his red hair poking through the bandage wrapped on his head, approached Mike and Peter with an extended hand.

"Congratulations fellows, wonderful game. Fantastic pitching, Mike. I heard your kind words, Chum. Was it your intention to resurrect my reputation? Because you certainly did. Half a dozen people who've been avoiding me all summer just shook my hand. What can you make of that? I also hear that you two were the first ones to give me aid in the parking lot last night. It occurs to me that maybe you guys had my back the entire summer, when no one else wanted the job. By the way, we raised over \$2500 this week. Enough to repair the town hall roof, and then some. All I can say is thanks, and that's a small payment."

Mike and Peter shared a knowing smile of relief, as Mr. Scott ambled off, with his slight limp, across the green expanse. The duo made their way back to the car where Janice danced and skipped in excitement, with the delicate wind as a partner. Her heroes were back and small matters, like winning or losing, didn't lessen their stature in her eyes.

Mr. Miller placed them in front of his car for a snapshot. Mike and Peter stood arms around shoulders, like war buddies, grinning for the camera. A quick click of Mr. Miller's shutter immortalized the moment.

In the photo's background white frame houses repeat themselves endlessly; the wash lines are full of flapping sheets, and the loyal teammates lean against a slouching 1956 Bel Air. The gold sportsmanship trophy stands tall at their feet, while above them, above everything, a silver jet hurtles across a vast blue expanse of sky, leaving a straight white plume of smoke that will never vanish.

25

THE SHORE

“*S* HOTGUN!” KAREN SHOUTED, AS SHE raced past Peter to the backseat.
“Shotgun!” Jo laughed, running to the opposite side.

Peter and Mike were left to carry the baggage and ice chests to the car.

“Shotgun by Jo,” Mike whispered to Peter, as he made room for his black staff in the trunk.

Mr. Miller, ready to get on the road, called to Peter from the driver's seat.

“Is everything in the trunk?”

“It's everything you set out,” Peter said, before suddenly remembering something he'd meant to bring. He ran in the house, returning with a cotton sock that he handed to Karen.

“What's this? An old sock of yours?”

“It's Udjuk. He's returned in one piece. Juan sent him back from some place called Groom Lake, Nevada.”

Karen rolled back the sock, and pulled out an intact Udjuk. She cried a little and gave Peter a warm hug.

"Mr. Miller, can we run by my house before we leave town? I want to show this to my grandfather and put it away for safekeeping. I also have something to return to Peter."

Mr. Miller drove to Karen's house. She ran in, returning shortly with her grandfather. Ataninnuaq handed Peter his Mickey Mantle card.

"Mickey is your responsibility again. You did well, and Karen and I are very happy to have Udjuk return at all, after his adventures with you."

Ataninnuaq shook hands with Mike, repeating his warning about the staff. Mike smiled politely. Ataninnuaq turned to address Jo.

"How are you feeling, Jo? You're not going to get carsick on the long drive, are you?"

"I haven't felt ill for a while. In fact, I've never felt better. I'm excited about this trip."

"That is good to hear. Take care, all of you. I will see you again, chimo."

The occupants of the crowded car waved good-bye to Ataninnuaq, as Mr. Miller pulled away from the curb to begin the journey to the Jersey shore. On the drive, Mike and Peter begged for the details of the recently completed agreement of the Bantam League dispute.

"Williamsport will remain the home of Bantam League Baseball for good. It cannot be moved. The Blackthorne Youth is disbanded and no longer associated with the league. It won't ever be the 'Blood and Honor' paramilitary

training organization Blackthorne hoped. Blackthorne-Triangle Capital withdrew its financial support for the league and left town."

"What about Mr. Scott? Will he still be the league commissioner?"

"To win the approval of the judge for the new incorporation, no person or group associated with the old incorporation was allowed on the ballot for the new Board of Directors. The sad fact is Clancy had to give up the league he founded, to keep its mission and values intact."

Peter dialed for stations on the pocket transistor radio he'd built, as he reflected on the unwinding summer. The other passengers counted horses and looked for out-of-state license plates. After the early morning start, and several hours of travel, the teenagers fell asleep like a litter of puppies on each other's laps and shoulders. Jo poked Peter awake as they crossed the Delaware Bridge into New Jersey.

"I've thought about what you said," she whispered, "and I decided to keep the necklace. I wore it for a half-hour last Sunday, while I prayed for my father. It was nice. I want to keep it that way, as something private and only for special occasions."

"I think having your heart in the right place makes all the difference," Peter whispered back.

Jo pressed his hand in thanks, and curled up against Mike's shoulder to continue her nap.

Awake now, Peter looked for his Mickey Mantle card,

and after searching quietly so as not to disturb his fellow passengers, he found it where Mike had carelessly placed it in the bright sun on the rear window deck. The ink on the previously perfect card was now slightly faded and damaged in spots. He recalled Ataninnuaq's early warning about their trade: 'whatever happens to Udjuk happens to Mickey'. Peter sighed with regret and stoically accepted responsibility. It wasn't Mike's fault. In both cases, with Udjuk and Mickey, Mike was just being Mike. Everything would be alright even if it wasn't perfect. Peter asked his mother to safeguard the baseball card until they were home again. If he couldn't trust his mother, who could he trust?

At the shore the teens helped unload the car, dubbed beds in their separate cottages, and then raced to the ocean's rolling surf to take in its beauty. Karen and Jo, never having been to the eastern shore, released a united yell above the noise of booming combers collapsing on the wet sand. Their eyes followed the dipping paths of clumsy pelicans and elegant gulls, sweeping across the crests of the waves, and delighted in sharing the sight of the tiny piping plovers, sprinting along the edge of the sizzling foam. The teens collectively agreed the shore was bliss.

"I'm going to spend the week flying kites, building sandcastles and throwing you into the waves," Mike shouted to Jo.

"Not happening because I'll be browsing the boardwalk shacks buying trinkets and seashells."

In the following days, Mike and Jo strolled on the boardwalk hand in hand, and laughed as they sunned next to each other on their beach towels.

"What do they laugh about all the time?" Karen asked Peter. "They sure have a lot of private jokes."

Peter and Karen took long walks of their own, along the beach, talking about nothing in particular and anything silly or serious that came to mind.

Laying out on the last day of vacation, Karen turned over on her stomach, studying her companions on either side. Jo's eyes peered over her movie star shades, as she rested on her elbows, reading a celebrity magazine and lending an ear to Mike. Mike was idly stabbing his ever-present black staff into the sand, and Karen found herself listening in on their conversation. She heard Mike saying something to Jo about the beauty of her eyes against the gray sea, and she saw Jo blush. Meanwhile, Peter lay on his back studying the claws of his awful rabbit's foot. In that moment Karen believed, despite all they had been through in the summer of 1956, that none of them were ready for the leap into their junior year.

"Why don't we all do something daring?" Karen suggested.

Peter glanced over at her.

"Like what?"

"Like we should all just let go! Let go of something, anything!"

"How about a bonfire on the beach tonight?" Mike suggested. "And we each throw something important to us into the fire?"

"Yeah," Peter chimed in, "like that stupid staff you're always carrying around. You should have burned it in the stage fire."

"Tell you what, burn your rabbit's foot and I'll burn this staff."

"Okay, but what about Jo?"

The group debated a suitable sacrifice for Jo, and she waited behind her sunglasses for the verdict.

"What about your shades?" Mike said. "I want to see your eyes more often, and you need to stop thinking about Hollywood all the time. Hollywood is fake. Focusing on celebrities hurts your schoolwork, and you need to study harder this year, if you're going to college."

"I like my RayBans. Besides, they're really expensive. Pick something else."

"How about your swimsuit?" Mike smiled.

"You're so obnoxious. Okay, I'll burn my sunglasses, but not until after the sun goes down."

"What about Karen?" Mike asked.

Karen wanted to hide under her beach towel when her friends began discussing her, probing into her secrets. She concentrated on drawing circles in the sand with her finger. Her cheeks and forehead were warm, and her mind raced with thoughts of what they might guess about her. She

pulled her towel closer around her shoulders, and then Mike touched on her secret fear.

"I think Karen's afraid to show herself to others, you know, like her real self. She's always acting in some role. I remember her saying she could never bare herself in public. I think she's the one who needs to burn her swimsuit."

Karen noticeably blanched, and Mike's mouth spread into a wide grin. Having been the first to set out the challenge it seemed cowardly to Karen to run away from it.

"So we all have our dare, and Miss Perfect's going to put herself out there. I can't wait for tonight."

That evening the four teenagers gathered driftwood and picked a secluded part of the beach to build a big bonfire. They cooked hot dogs and burned marshmallows on sticks. The pagan fire and wild elements excited Karen, her skin tingled and she was vaguely aroused. She reminded herself of something her grandfather once said - no moment exists except the moment you are in. Karen told herself to stay in the moment. Peter bravely started first, standing up at the fireside and making a small speech.

"I sacrifice my lucky rabbit's foot. We all know luck exists, because we've all been really lucky this summer, and we're luckiest of all to have each other. Anyway, this foot wasn't very lucky for the rabbit."

Peter tossed his rabbit's foot into the fire and its hair was immediately consumed. The fire purred and snacked on the rabbit bones while the friends watched. Then Jo stood up at

the perimeter of the fire, quickly tossing her sunglasses into the flames.

"Bye James Dean, bye Hollywood. I guess I'll never follow the stars. I'll have to find happiness somewhere else."

Jo sat back down, brushing sand from her legs and ankles. Mike and Karen looked at each other.

"You're next, Karen. This staff isn't going into the fire until I'm sure you've gone through with your sacrifice."

Hesitation would take away the bravery of her act, and there was nothing else to do but the obvious. Karen quickly peeled down her swimsuit, shed it into the fire, and ran unashamed into the waves. She felt wild and free, and at that moment she knew she could do anything she chose to do with her life. Jo greeted her at the shoreline with a towel, and Karen wrapped herself before returning, shivering, to the fire. The tattoo on her left shoulder glowed faintly in the starlight.

"Where does it get its glow?" Peter asked.

"The glow comes from a sea cucumber, the ink is made from council fire soot."

"Can I touch it?" Peter asked.

Karen shifted her shoulder slightly towards Peter, wordlessly allowing him to trace the outlines with his fingers.

"Holy cow. I don't think your luck deserted you, Chum," Mike whistled.

"Now you, Mike," Karen challenged.

Mike stood up at last, holding the staff with both hands in front of the fire.

"I sacrifice this staff to Hunga, as my last fire sacrifice to him. I'm quit on fire."

Mike flipped the rod into the bright licking flames. A great flash tore up from the pyre and a powerful wind rushed in from all sides, sucking the cool ocean breeze into the hot torrent, carrying multi-colored flames thirty feet into the sky. Peter thought it was a sublime sight, and he came up behind Karen to put his strong arms around her. When the magical display was over, they doused the bonfire with buckets of seawater, and hiked back along the beach in darkness.

Karen's towel covered her well enough to get back to the cottage in decency. She lost sight of Mike and Jo in the darkness, and she and Peter stopped several times to kiss in the moonlight. Maybe something important had changed. They soon saw the bright windows of their cottages and searched their way through the dunes towards the beckoning lights. Near home they reconnected on a sandy trail, collectively sensing the mystery of the quiet earth at night, and its pulse in the waves.

Karen was in a stirred state when she and Jo finally made their way back to the porch at the girls' cottage. Just before they went in the door, a rogue wind roughly tousled their hair, and snapped the towels against their thighs. The girls waited for the wild wind to disappear through the waving

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scattered clumps of sea oats anchored in the dunes. Before entering, they silently shared the thought that the shore was saying good-bye, and together they waved farewell in return.

Jo went in first, answering questions and giving a carefully censored version of their bonfire. Karen said a quick good night, slipping in behind Jo to their front bedroom. Jo came in soon after, flipped the lights out and they crawled into their beds. The adventure of the long season was finally at a close. The Summer Set was more than ready for their junior year.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Fort Worth, TX and raised in El Paso, Texas, Jay Province is a graduate of Indiana University. Among his many varied interests are sailing, oil painting and horses. He lives with his wife Patricia in Nebraska.