



Cristofori's Dream



a novel by

ROBERT ITALIA

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A NOTE ABOUT THE TITLE: *CRISTOFORI'S DREAM*

Contemporary piano and New Age music fans certainly recognize this title. It is the signature album and song of Grammy-nominated pianist David Lanz—a tribute to the inventor of the piano, Bartolomeo Cristofori. Originally released in 1988, *Cristofori's Dream* topped Billboard's New Age chart for twenty-seven weeks and eventually went platinum. Twenty-five years later, this celebrated album has been re-released as *Cristofori's Dream . . . Re-envisioned*.

Though this novel has no affiliation with Mr. Lanz, his album and song of the same name, or its subject, the music did inspire the writing. The title merely reflects this novel's main theme, which is why it was chosen.

For more about David Lanz and his inspirational music, please visit his website: www.davidlanz.com

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

For my angel, Karen



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The Monster

“Chris, Chris, wake up, wake up! The Monster...it’s coming.”

The little girl’s strained whispers crashed through his head like a clap of thunder that scattered the dreamscape and left only blackness.

The Monster? Here? Wait, where exactly am I?

His eyes flew open, and as the wind began to rise, Chris saw his sister’s dark and ghoulish figure standing in her nightgown next to his bed, and backlit by an eerie light. Her breaths were rapid and shallow. It was Janey—poor, sad Janey, longing for their mother, fearing a storm, and seeking comfort and protection. *Right?* He blinked hard, sparking a flash. The thunder crashed again. A storm or *the* Storm? This was getting crazy.

Feeling gutted but fully aware of what happened earlier in the day, Chris sat up and wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth. Then he glanced about. Stark walls, barren floor...his familiar prison firmly in place. Yet something strange *was* happening. His clothes were drenched in sweat, and his skin tingled from the strong charge in the air. Along the periphery, shadow figures—never seen before, their origins unknown—stood shoulder-to-shoulder and shifted nervously, as if they wanted to flee. The red light on his clock radio glared at him and seemed to record his fear. And the voices inside it mumbled their steady alarm...and his name. “Janey?” he said, grasping for some sanity. His lips felt hard to move. When she didn’t answer, Chris squinted, fine-tuned his hearing, and detected other troubling telltale sights and sounds.

Please don’t leave us, not with him, his voice cried from beyond.

I’m sorry, his mother said. *I don’t know why this is happening.*

At the window, the glittering but deadly white butterfly, tapping the glass as it fluttered, trying to get in. Behind it, radiant snowflakes as big as feathers drifted down in the warm raging air. Far beyond, the pulsing spires of the Bethlehem Star, shining just above a pointy treetop, looking for that safe place to send the Child, and finding them instead. Its gaze lit the room with the ghostly light.

The stage was set, props in place. And then the Story took hold...

The grandfather clock in the foyer struck midnight. Its clanging echoed up through the loft. Janey's face froze in a pale mask of fright, and her shallow breaths ceased. Then she shrank and hovered with golden translucent wings. In her tiny hands, cupped so precisely, she held the glowing Purple Orb. Suddenly, as if it knew, some *thing* pounded slowly but with deadly intent up the foyer's wooden stairs, a chain dragging behind, raking the treads.

Be strong, and take care of your sister.

But Mom, you know who he is. He'll kill us.

With the winds still howling, the footsteps reached the landing, stopped for a moment, then continued their loud and steady climb. Like a drumbeat, but with a sledgehammer. Iron pounding wood. A bad dream, a false alarm? Whatever it was...was heading their way. Chris blinked hard again, inciting a crackling flash. The pounding refused to yield. Still hovering, Janey seemed accepting of—no, oblivious to the madness. Just playing her role so loyally. And though, in this form, she possessed a great strength, Janey stared at him with round black eyes and whispered in a small voice: "Don't let it get me."

Don't worry, I'll be watching over you.

Will you? Will you, really?

There had been signs before, this year of Sandra's demise: a flash here, a rumble there—and intrusions that he brushed aside—hinting at something frighteningly beautiful, just beyond this world, that they all had created to escape him. But this? Playing like a movie toward an unknown end? And then Chris saw it, like each of the paintings, so painfully obvious and factual. This nightmare was his fault. He had abandoned his post and let her down again, leaving the *White Rose* unguarded, if only for just a bit. And while he had slept, thinking only of himself, bad thoughts and dreams written in the Book that controlled the Dark Power of the Other World seeped in like a fog and quietly altered parts of reality, just as he designed it to do. Now they were in it, and he could not reverse the horror that was surely coming for them.

Chris sprang from the bed and rushed to the door to slam it shut. Then he darted to the closet and threw open the folding louvered doors. "Hurry!"

Promise me you'll take care of her. Promise me you won't give up our secrets. He mustn't find them—not ever.

Janey flew beneath the hanging wardrobe and curled up in the corner, trying to make herself as small as possible, and protect the Orb. This nightmare might be unending if she lost that precious thing. Chris stepped inside the closet and closed the doors as best he could. But in his haste, he left a small opening. No time for precision, they had to be still. He huddled there with her in the slotted light and hoped that the Monster would pass by.

Don't forget to use the Book. It will save you.

But Mom, I want you to save us.

The heavy footsteps arrived at the bedroom door. Chris and Janey held their breath. They dared not make a sound, even in the tumult. Maybe, just maybe, the thing from that Other World would turn away and disappear into the Boiling Black Cloud from where it came. How he wished she *hadn't* given him the Book, that he hadn't written the Story. Then maybe they'd be safe.

Quickly, now. I need to hear it.

I promise, Mom, I promise.

At that instant, Chris heard the sound he feared the most: the bedroom doorknob rattling with a fury. The Monster's intent was truly clear. It was looking for them, to do her harm, and obtain the sacred Orb. They would have to endure the horror this night—by themselves, now that the Sorceress had abandoned them. And God, shining His light on them, for His amusement, refusing again to answer their prayers, so He could watch them suffer.

I'll see you one day in the Village, yes? In the Village.

Don't do this to us. Please don't.

Janey let out a yelp—smothered by Chris' firm hand. "Shhh!" he said. Though their outer defense might crumble, they remained safe in the closet, as long as they kept silent. The Monster was powerful but its mind was addled by hate and greed. If it saw that the bedroom was empty, it might turn away.

Oh my God. Oh my God. I can see it!

See what? Mom? Mom!

The rattling continued, more furious than before, as the creature groaned at a device it could not understand or defeat. Then unexpectedly, the rattling stopped. What now?

Forgive me. It is time.

No!

The bedroom door exploded inward.

In the roaring wind, Chris heard the chain dragging on the bedroom floor, the cloven hand sliding across the wall just behind him. He clutched Janey tighter and shut his eyes once more. But then as he listened to the thunder, his lids rose like a theater curtain. He just had to see.

With all those tufts of fur and curling horns, the Monster and its shadow drifted past the closet, a woolly Medusa, eclipsing the slats of light. The cloven hooves pounded the floor, iron on wood. The cloven hand slid down the door. *Clack, clack, clack.* Drafts exhaled from flaring nostrils like steam from a locomotive, and filled the closet with its foul but familiar breath. Chris pressed one side of Janey's head against his chest and covered her exposed ear with his hand. He did not want the frightful sounds to enter

her mind, to be captured there like floating orbs that could haunt her forever. But though they had been in a similar situation once before, he could not stop her from trembling.

The Monster jammed the bed against the wall and stopped, as if to ponder. Chris' eyes widened. *That's what it wants?* Yes, yes, now he could see: What a stupid place to hide anything!

But Chris had to frown as the shadow of the Monster's rising arm flickered through the louvers. The chain rattled, ready to strike. But at what? *Them?*

The bedside lamp exploded from a furious blow. Shards of glass peppered the closet doors. The Monster bellowed so loud in its bull-like way—deep from the dark chambers of its massive chest—that Chris could hardly hear Janey's shriek.

Chris wrapped her in his arms as the assault began. He could feel her writhing, attempting to flee, as she had tried years ago. If Janey escaped, she'd fly into the thrashings. And that was something, playing *his* sacred part, he would never allow. Furniture splintered, glass shattered—everything lashed with the chain. The Monster groaned with the howling wind, trying to alter the hated reality in its own way, to wipe it clean and expose the treasures, just as the Sorceress had warned. The whole house seemed to quake, ready to collapse. For a moment, Chris felt as if the tornado had found them, and was tearing up their lives once more.

But then, just like *that* awful storm, the thrashings ceased, the fury spent. All he could hear in the eerie calm was the sound of the Monster...weeping. Tears of acid and self-pity, its suffering never-ending. At least that part was working out well.

Chris sighed, and rocked Janey in his arms. He had saved her again, like he was supposed to do, and their secrets remained safe. "It's okay, it's over, it's over." The worst of it, anyway. But she could not stop crying or shaking, for which he felt a sickening guilt. Now, all he wanted to do was disappear, back into the beautiful part of his dream, into the World of the Paintings, where he once thought he had full control. But he had to wait for the final act to play out, and continue to hold her. Only then could they emerge.

All at once, more pounding—on the foyer's front door. Then the frantic tolling of the foyer bells, as loud as the booming thunder. Chris heard a man shouting, but he could not identify the voice. Had Katie heard the roars? Would she rush over to investigate? My God, what would she think? Those were Sandra's worries echoing in his mind, but he couldn't help himself. He was just as much a part of her as he was of his father.

The Monster, still weeping, threw the chain against a wall, then, transforming once more, drifted away with the Boiling Black Cloud...down the hall...down the stairs...and back into the study. The pounding and the

shouting and the ringing stopped when the front door latch snapped open, sparking one final flash that cleared his mind and the freaky air. The Story, already abridged for this episode, had come to an abrupt end.

“Victor,” the man’s voice boomed above the thunderclap, “I was out in back, and heard some awful noises. What’s going on?” A pause, and then: “My word, Victor, what happened to your hand?”

“She’s dead,” Victor said with a slur. “It’s *your* fault she’s dead!”

“Yes, yes,” the man said in a hurry, without remorse or sympathy. “Where are they, Victor?”

“Damn house, damn kids. I don’t want this. It’s my money. She stole it from me. And then she gave it to them.”

“Victor—the children.”

“They’re hiding something, I know they are! Damn house, damn kids. Now what am I supposed to do?”

“No, you love your children. Say it, Victor, *say it!*”

“I love my damn kids.”

“Tell me where they are. Did you hurt them?” Another pause, then a shout: “Chris? *Janey?*”

Someone started running up the stairs.

Now certain who the man was, Chris pushed open the closet doors, stood up, and held out his right hand to his sobbing sister. Her human stature had been restored, and the Orb had vanished. She still seemed unaware. “Come on, Janey, the Monster’s gone.” So this is how it worked. He’d have to keep that from her as well.

Janey reached out to Chris and they stepped from the closet. The ceiling light flicked on and sent ripples of anger across his skin. Chris turned briefly from the glare, his eyes narrowing. A lanky, middle-aged man in a tan windbreaker one size too small entered the room with a flourish—then froze like a statue. Their reluctant neighbor, Doctor Samuel. An astrolabe no bigger than a pocket watch dangled from a delicate gold chain around his long neck. They had seen the doctor earlier in the day, under similarly dreadful circumstances. But now his presence brought little comfort. He seemed out of place in all of the rubble. After all, this was part of their existence he was never meant to see.

Dr. Samuel raised his wild brows, and his tired eyes brightened. “What in the world?”

Chris pulled Janey to his side. She clung to him for protection and support. He was glad she still saw him that way, after this. Then he scanned the bedroom. He could not accept this final act of madness on a day that had already become incomprehensible. The nightstand was a jumble of stained wood, the headboard splintered. Only an experienced eye would recognize the rake marks from that awful chain. And his clock radio, somehow

unscathed and beneath it all, the red light still peering. The dresser lay on its face, its cardboard backing punched with holes. The curtain rod on the window hung diagonally across the opening, and a breeze ruffled the valance. Worst of all were the bloody prints that streaked every wall. Should have known this would happen, that the Power he helped create would turn against them. The signs were there, after the funeral. But like the intrusions, Chris chose to ignore them. Now he had been reminded, the warning delivered. The Monster *was* gone, but it would be back, seeking the treasures—and an outcome it should not contemplate.

Dr. Samuel lowered his stunned gaze on them. “Are you two all right?”

This was his chance to tell Dr. Samuel everything, and show him the Book. But the doctor had terrible powers of his own. If the awful truth did get out, if he knew what was truly happening in these Chambers of Doom, Dr. Samuel would rip them apart, just like the Monster wanted to do. Nothing in this world, or any other, could be worse. And as with every other problem he faced, Chris would tackle this one on his own, without anyone questioning his judgment, or wondering if he were insane. “Yeah, we’re fine, just great,” Chris said at last, as a matter of routine, as if nothing happened, as if nothing ever happened, just as Sandra often did. They had to stay together and endure, and never *ever* give up their secrets. But already, he twitched in uncommon defiance of that long-standing tradition.

The doctor kept staring. Then his wild brows dropped into a frown, and the light in his eyes intensified.

Chris turned away and bowed his head. He knew what the doctor was thinking. Suddenly, Chris saw it: *Libro Omnia*, The Book of Everything, unearthed from the land of those revered Alpine woods and mountains, and steeped in the scary legends that were part of the Story, and his being—now protruding from beneath his lumpy, cockeyed mattress. *Bauerneinband*, full vellum, with gilded spine and borders. He snatched this treasure with his left hand and clutched it to his chest, making certain that the doctor could not see its blind-stamped cover, its controlling power over all others now undeniable. With her final words, the Sorceress had bestowed that power. That was so obvious, too. Anyone would get it—even Janey, if he ever told her what he knew. Yet even now, with the rules becoming clearer, Chris could not understand fully how the bad part of their holy fantasy had slipped into this reality, becoming real, and so deadly. As the Grand Experiment was teaching him, he’d have to accept the horror as fact just like everything else that was wrong. Because it did happen. He saw it, he heard it, and he felt it. And no one could convince him otherwise, not that he’d give anyone the chance. Why bother trying to explain things? They wouldn’t understand. Especially Dr. Samuel, who doubted everything, and wasn’t so easily fooled.

“Chris, watch Janey,” Dr. Samuel said, as if Chris had to be told. “I’ll be right back.” The doctor rushed out the door.

Looking to cause more trouble, no doubt, and send in his agents. He’d have to find a way to fool them, too. “C’mon, Janey,” Chris said, “just you and me. Just you and me.” The Pact, as he had promised only a few nights ago.

Chris led his whimpering sister into the hall. They would hide in her bedroom tonight, behind a locked door, and try to mend their wounds with words. But none would be spoken. It was their escape from this world that he had to carefully plan. And it really had to work. But use the Book for that purpose, as the Sorceress had begged him to do? And leave beautiful Catherine behind? *Katie Cat Kate*, so close and so perfect in every way, who he couldn’t live without. Where would that dark path lead? An idea, born from that twitching defiance, blossomed in his mind—an amazing idea, really, though he doubted Katie would go along with it, considering what had to be done. Somehow, he had to *make* her understand, because he would not go without her. Even to him it seemed so impossible, and frightening. Janey would agree with that, once she found out. Already their lives were tumbling in a new direction, toward an uncertain future.

After all, it *was* just them.

The Book.

And the Monster.

PART ONE



Coping

The Demon Horde

Because of last spring's totally misunderstood Church Incident (*and that's all it was, really*, he once wrote), Christopher Russo had to stand silently in line with the other freshman football wannabes in the dank bowels of Holy Cross High School, wait for his turn with "Clueless" Coach Joe Przybyszewski at the equipment counter, just ahead, and endure the humiliation about to burst from that otherwise jolly face. The portly coach, in his traditional black workout garb, was mulling over the wannabe roster with pen in hand like a judge about to sign a commitment order. Chris stood rigidly in his powder-blue shirt and baggy, deep-blue trousers. He didn't dare step across or even touch the black line taped to the concrete floor until he was told to do so, fearing his reaction to the howls from the Demon Horde, its hated members scattered among the blue-clad wannabes behind him, watching his every move, and hell-bent on total domination. Confronting them was never good for him *or* them. Certainly not here, in the volatile dankness, with Coach Joe present, and certainly not now, with the Book's controlling power still available, which remained a permanent but unseen part of reality, like gravity and the air, flowing everywhere, and through everything.

Which Chris could still use to change everything...

...if he really wanted to.

"Next, please," the coach said like a polite grizzly, his tiny eyes focused on the roster.

The ridiculous greeting ritual, complete with its own strange language, started up again as Chris reluctantly approached.

"Ah, Cristofori Russolini, my little *bambini*," the coach bellowed, for all the world to hear, "how's your *mamma mia*? You're lookin' a little thin. Aren't you gettin' e-nuffa *pasta fazuli*? Or isn't she makin' that for you-uh no more-ay?"

"Hey, coach, '*That's Amore*'!" someone sang. A new twist of the knife. The others in line erupted in laughter.

Then, as if the entire scene had been rehearsed, which wouldn't have surprised Chris all that much, the coach checked something off the roster,

strolled down an aisle between the metal racks, and began to sing like a baritone: “*When the Moon hits your thigh like a big piece of pie...*”

With his face burning, Chris arrived at the counter, bowed his head, and carefully closed his eyes. Their cruel words, though expected, still felt like daggers. He didn’t wannabe a football wannabe. He wanted to disappear. But he resisted, because he just had to. Part of his new strategy to survive in this reality, before another escape attempt occurred, with all its inevitable dramas, and unintended consequences. “She’s dead,” Chris muttered at last, to remind himself, and them—and to shut them up. He could only take so much. But, oh, how he hated to say it—that, and singing.

Coach Joe snapped his broad head around, and his shallow brow crinkled. The laughter continued. “*Par-doni?*” the coach said.

You want more? “I said she’s dead!”

Coach Joe’s eyes widened, and he reeled from the force of the statement. The equipment room fell silent, except for a few snickers that lingered like those sobering last drops from the storm. They were embarrassed—good. He had returned the favor, and restored order in a normal-human way. But they still didn’t care, and that still bothered him.

The coach returned to the counter and set down a wire basket full of pads topped off with a spotless purple helmet. “Hey, I’m sorry, son, I didn’t know. When did that happen?”

His mind went blank, which was a rare occurrence. Chris never committed the date to memory. Never wanted to, so he kept it foggy, like lots of things. “Two years ago, I guess.”

“From what?”

“Cancer.” That word, and others, once written respectfully in the Book of Everything as a proper noun to signify its power over all, was now used for the power it held over all of his detractors. It did not betray the Legacy that he so desperately fought. How little they knew of her, or him, or anything that mattered. He intended to keep it that way, for the sake of his larger plans.

Coach Joe ran his fat hand across his dark flattop, then fumbled with the pads. “You know, if you’d talk more, I might find out about these things.” He slid the basket toward Chris. “Here ya go, son. Give ’em Hell out there.”

“Yeah...good word.” Already on the List and in the Story, each an important part of the Book that controlled the intruding Dark Power. Hell was his life on the practice field...and in school, and... He put a clamp on his negative thoughts, just as his mother, fearing the Legacy, begged him to do while she lay dying—when the Way to Pandæmonium opened wide a few nights later, and its Dark Power overwhelmed him. He, and she, despised self-pity. That was straight out of Victor’s playbook. Chris wanted and

needed more self-control of his emotions, of everything in this upside-down world. That was his idea of happiness, and why he had banished the Book. He vowed to keep fighting those negative impulses, no matter how reserved those efforts made him look.

Chris grabbed the basket and whirled around. But he refused to make eye contact with any of the Horde, certain that they were still watching, trying to decipher his thoughts. If he looked at them any longer... He headed down the dimly lit concrete tunnel to the locker room, with *its* disturbing shadows, the sickening smell of chlorine and sweat building with each unwilling step.

Despite the razzing and the danger the coach's odd words fostered, Chris didn't feel much ill will toward the man. He couldn't. Not even the "Gee, that's too bad—let's play football" attitude bothered him all that much (since he was friendless, Chris got a lot of that after she died). Unlike the wannabes and the Horde, Coach Joe was new to the scene, and the crucial facts. The truth was, Chris was no more Italian than the many jars of grocery store red sauce in their home pantry. Sure, Chris' father was born to Sicilian immigrants (who brought with them a secret). But Sandra's parents were Austrian (they brought the treasures and the legends, and secrets of their own). So that made him "Austalian," Janey liked to say. Austalians were a uniquely talented and colorful breed (with things *they* needed to hide). Still, from day one of football practice when he first bellowed roll call, Coach Joe seized upon Chris' distinctive last name of Russo. "Russo" quickly became "Russolini" (*After Mussolini? I'll have to ask someday*) and "Chris" became "Cristofori." The correct translation was Cristoforo. But somehow—as Chris found out by chance one day while reading the "C" book of his antiquated encyclopedia collection for the umpteenth time—Coach Joe got the translation mixed up with the inventor of the piano, Bartolomeo Cristofori. Maybe the coach thought most Italian words ended with an "i." Or maybe he wanted to draw attention away from his impossibly-difficult-to-spell last name. Whatever the reason, because of his own flawed knowledge of the language, Chris accepted Coach Joe's peculiar brand of playful but mangled Italian as authentic, which Chris duly noted often in his diary. (*Anything written in the Book becomes official—another good reason to hide it.*) So all kidding aside, Chris considered Coach Joe an ally. He was one of a few at joyless and appropriately girl-less Holy Cross High School who wanted Chris to make the freshman starting team.

If only the coach knew how vitally important it was.

And, most damning of all, why.

This whole salvation-through-sports thing was Victor's decree. Unforgiving Victor the Monster (aka his worthless father), pacing at home, alone with the Keeper of the Sacred Orb (aka the still-believing

Janey), dreaming of the riches she commanded and the respect that he didn't—and demanding daily reports of Chris' expected progress. Chris was in no position to cross him. The escape plan (and because of the Monster, they still desperately needed one), worked upon so diligently for an entire year, was now in tatters and they were stuck as Chris built and tested a new plot—all because of the Twelfth Night, and the annoying Epiphany setback with Katie, so unexpected, but safely hidden, which nevertheless showed him the folly of his former childish ways. The New World, *Forever Christmas*, The World That Soon Would Be. Such a beautifully wicked place, always crackling in his mind. And he desperately wanted it to be true, until he realized that he could not control its horrors. In the end, the Grand Experiment, though shuttered as a dangerous disaster, had shown him a new and healthy way to understand things, which would even make Dr. Samuel proud. Despite the continued intrusions, that New World was more like a haze, lacking any real mass, permanence, or benefit, other than to hide in for a time. (*Fake, phony, just a lie.*) His insecurity blanket, no doubt. He needed real results, involving real things from this reality where they *were* stuck, that wouldn't place Janey in harm's way. And yet, he had to be careful. The brilliant Way to that fake and phony World—and its violent trigger—was always open and still accessible, with the willful blink of an eye. And though he had managed to construct an effective method to keep it all under control, the Book and its Story remained powerful things that could ensnare him, and make him a lie as well.

Chris arrived in the locker room and started down an aisle crowded with wannabes suiting up. One by one, they stared back at him, sizing *him* up. Suddenly, someone behind Chris blew a whistle. His scalp bunched like a kicked-up rug. "Ten minutes to calisthenics," Coach Pete Wozniak shouted from his office doorway. "Let's go, kiddies. Your mommy's not here to dress you."

Coach "Woz" had sounded the alarm. Bodies scattered. Metal locker doors everywhere were yanked opened or slammed shut. The sounds boxed his ears.

Chris rushed to his locker, dialed the three-number combination that opened the door to his torment, and undressed. He hated getting into trouble. He had the Legacy to thank for that. The football pants were first, then the shoulder pads and practice jersey—all the instruments of his enslavement. Finally, he checked to make sure that the unholy copy of his playbook, its photocopied hand-drawn diagrams already photocopied to memory, rested on the top shelf with his spikes. (*Lose that book, lose your life.*) Like the book that powered their hokey religion and hid the truth and caused so much trouble, the playbook set the path to another insanity.

"Hey, dago," a voice called out.

Chris looked to his left and saw Tom Fitzgerald standing at the end of the aisle. As the anointed starting quarterback of the freshman team, “Fitz,” though hardly original with his name-calling, had the power to draw Chris’ attention whenever he appeared. Not that Chris admired Fitz. (*No way!*) It was a survival instinct, first deployed when they attended middle school together. Like the other members of the beloved and mindless Demon Horde, Fitz showed signs that he, unlike Chris, was morphing into something he didn’t deserve: manhood—patchy but shaven beard on a pimply face, pronounced brow, a tinge of deepness in his voice. Overall, he was taller and more muscular than Chris, who felt like a cowering boy in his presence.

“Better get your spikes on, wop,” Fitz said. “You know what happens if you’re late.”

Out of the corner of his right eye, and separate from the shadow figures (their origins still unknown), Chris saw a colorful someone reaching into his locker. A large, freckly hand snatched his spikes. Chris turned right and saw the redheaded Jim Koch—rangy but powerful—running away as he laughed with Chris’ spikes in hand.

“Now that’s *amore*,” Fitz said. “See ya on the practice field, Cristofori.”

Chris took up the chase. When he slid to a stop at the end of the aisle, Chris saw Koch disappear around the far corner of the lockers. Chris pursued him and soon reached the frosted glass door marked Pool that was slowly closing. Without breaking stride, Chris turned his left shoulder into the door and pushed with his forearm into the heated arena. A ripple on the pool’s surface radiated outward from two slowly sinking and distorted black objects. Koch stood at the opposite end of the pool. He laughed again, and then slipped through another frosted glass doorway. *Steady...steady.*

But time was running out. Wading into the pool was out of the question. The spikes were in deep water. Chris returned to the locker room and searched for someone—anyone—who could help. But the locker room was empty.

Racing back to the pool area, Chris spotted a lifesaving extension pole partially buried beneath a tangle of ropes, buoys, and nets. It took him much too long to retrieve his spikes, grab his helmet, and reach the berm-lined practice field in time. By then, all the wannabes, aligned in neat rows, went about their exercise routines as Coach Wozniak and Coach Joe looked on.

With clipboard in hand, Coach Woz blew his whistle, stopping all activity. Chris was front and center beneath a white-hot spotlight. Hell had different forms, too.

“Name?” Woz said, eyes locked on the clipboard.

“Russo,” Chris said, though he knew Woz was aware of this fact.

Woz’s stoic expression remained unchanged. He stared over the top of his glasses at Chris, but the whites of his eyes seemed to be on fire. Wozniak

was not an athletic-looking man. Much older than Coach Joe, Woz had rounded shoulders, skinny arms and legs, knobby knees, and his pencil-thin neck was no match for his oversized head that begged battering. But Woz commanded their respect, even drew fear, because he could shatter everyone's impossible sports dreams with a quick thumbs down. "Russo, what?" he said.

Chris sighed. How he loathed these power games. Only Dr. Samuel deserved the respect. "Russo, sir," Chris said finally. He heard snickering, like the stuff from his clock radio, which ended the moment Woz looked about. The coach gazed down at Chris' wet shoes and nodded repeatedly without emotion. Then he stared at Chris. "You want to tell me how that happened, kid?"

Chris glanced at Fitz, at Koch, at all members of the Horde—a collection of guys who had grown much faster than the likes of Chris, and who never hesitated to use their superior physiques to their advantage. Chris still had a special place in his heart, in his Book, and in the Story, for them. *Åsgårdsrei!* It was always tempting to shout it, and tear this world apart. He could see their eyes sinking into their skulls, their flesh rotting. Chris carefully closed his lids and breathed deeply to silence the booming echo and reset the image before the Dark Power took hold and swept them all away into its fog of deception. At least it wasn't The Holy Season of Magic, when the Story could run wild and control him for weeks on end, like last year. Still allowed, with its countdown and rules etched in stone, that time was coming, and everyone remained especially vulnerable. It'd be here before they knew it, or suspected a thing.

But for now, their horrible grins were almost impossible to endure. Somehow, without using the Power, the Demon Horde needed to be stopped. Of course, Chris wanted to tell everything he knew about Woz's chosen ones: how they conspired, bullied, lied, and cheated their way through sports, school—even life—all the while gaining complete admiration from coaches, teachers, students, and parents for their ability to push a goofy ball one hundred yards down a stupid football field. *It's about teamwork and achieving a goal, kid.* Yeah, yeah, yeah—he got all that. Because he was good at them, Chris actually liked sports. But, just like Victor, Fitz and the Horde had their own special take on sportsmanship, which severely altered the appeal. *Tell all? I'd be glad to. Are you ready, coach? Are you ready?*

"Well, kid?" Woz said.

Chris saw in Woz's dark eyes that this was yet another test—to see if he was willing to run with the loser herd and not cause trouble. Victor insisted on this. "They...they fell in the pool, sir."

Woz frowned. "What were you doing in the pool area?"

“Looking for my shoes, sir.”

More laughter, more glaring, more silence. Then Woz looked at Chris. “You want to make this team, you gotta show up on time.”

“Yes, sir.”

One final stare, just to see if Chris dared to speak his mind. “Okay, kid, take a lap.”

Chris’ eyes widened. A lap? That was his reward for going along?

“Is there a problem, kid?”

“No, sir.”

“Then get going.”

To keep the peace and the world real, Chris turned away, strapped on his required helmet, and headed west over the berm, then south along tree-lined Pine Street, which took him past the hated apple grove, where the Horde often met at lunchtime to steal a snack and hatch their plots against him. A few hooded, robe-clad Franciscan brothers worked in the grove, trimming branches and picking fruit, the unwitting accomplices to the insidious evil that had seized the entire complex, including the apples, which Chris dared not eat. The brothers, housed on the complex, often stopped Chris in the halls to remind him of their counseling services for those “in need.” But it was much too late for that. Sure helped explain why he was running a lap.

A lap was no ordinary punishment. A lap was often reserved for the most belligerent, the most despised of the freshman tryouts—worthless know-nothing “unfocused kids” like Chris, with “attitude problems.” A lap meant missing more than an hour of practice at his tailback position. Without Chris’ presence, the competition would get more playing time—more time for the coach to admire other talent, and forget Chris’.

Still, Chris knew he was the fastest guy on the team, which up to now had saved him from being cut, and condemned forever to that blazing subterranean palace he had once condemned others. Chris had always been a fast and elusive runner. He had developed his skills playing tag on the asphalt playground during the glory days at St. Boniface Middle School. The object? Run from one end of the playground to the other without getting dinged. If you did, you’d be forced to join Fitz’s own vile horde that roamed the lot in search of prey. (Fitz, too, had honed his skills at St. Boniface.) After a while, most of the eighth grade class fell victim to these predators. But the fastest and most resourceful stayed alive to the very end of recess—guys like himself, Larry Witosz, and Matt Cavanaugh, the undisputed king of their elite group. Matt organized them and devised strategies to defeat Fitzgerald and his followers, sometimes arranging a wager, which grew each time he goaded Fitz into accepting the challenge. Matt would often sacrifice himself at the very end, so Chris could win the game, and the cash. But those days were gone. The king was

deposed, exiled to his own private and lonely Hell—some out-of-state military school—leaving Fitz and the Demon Horde to cast their evil spell over the Holy Cross freshman class. Without their leader, Chris and Larry became lost souls and disgraced outcasts. But Chris knew well that this unfortunate outcome was not solely Fitzgerald's doing. Far from it.

The lap seemed to go on forever as Chris pounded his way in the grass along the streets that lined the complex. His legs felt heavy, and his lungs burned as he listened to the sounds of his labored breaths and the late summer wind howling through his helmet's ear holes. At least the light protected him. (*Maybe that's what Mom saw the night she died.*) It wasn't the memory of Victor's threats, forever hanging over him, that kept Chris going, not at this moment. Visions of that night, and Janey's voice, spurred him on. *Don't let it get me.* Letting her down was the greatest sin of all—that, and breaking the Pact. He had to become a football star.

Chris arrived at the church on the northwest corner of the complex. Then he turned south along Pine Street where he finally reached the parking lot entrance. Time to face them again.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Chris stopped and gazed northward, his line of sight searching the empty street as he listened intently through his heavy breaths. A postal truck crossed the intersection. A bicyclist streaked past the church.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Intrusions, drawing near—in the daylight, no less! All his fault. He shouldn't have thought about it. But where were they? Sounds always preceded appearances as these things slipped through the *White Rose's* blinding gap. Were they really on their way? As that horrible night had showed him, Chris had to keep his guard up—and them at bay—while he appeased and thought and plotted.

Chris kept his eyes peeled northward and his emotions in check. But when nothing unworldly appeared, he raced to the practice field where Woz and Coach Joe, at the fifty-yard line, watched the first team execute their designed plays. Still gasping from his long run, Chris—after one last glance toward the parking lot—removed his helmet and stood beside Woz. The exhaustion was unlike anything Chris had experienced. He was great at sprints, not marathons. His stomach was in a knot, his vision blurred and spotted, and his head pounded with every furious heartbeat. But he refused to let Woz know he was in such misery. Many outcasts never made it back from a lap. Either they returned along the same path on which they left, only to be banished from the team, or they returned their equipment and went home. Chris wasn't allowed to give the coach what they both wanted.

Woz glanced at Chris, and then fixed his gaze on the first team. Fitz took the snap and handed it off to Jim Wenzel. "The Weasel" tried to hit the

hole, but it closed too quickly. So he bounced to the left end where Koch had John “Dirty” Dahlberg tied up in an expert block. Koch pushed Dahlberg toward the sideline. That created a huge gap between Koch and the left tackle. Instead of cutting up the gap, Wenzel followed Koch. Dahlberg spun away from Koch, wrapped the Weasel up in a bear hug, and slammed him to the ground. The Weasel shot-put the ball at Dahlberg’s face, but Dirty slapped it away. He loomed over his victim, ready to pounce. All the while, Woz looked on emotionless, the whistle dangling from his neck. Chris could tell that Woz was pleased. He was building “character.”

Still in his black shorts and T-shirt, and unprepared for the reality of the Dahlberg and Woz they all knew too well, Coach Joe charged in like a grizzly as he retrieved his whistle from his fanny pack. A rapid series of whistle blows finally quelled the anger. Dahlberg began to walk away—and stepped on the Weasel’s pinky finger. Fitz rushed over and shoved Dahlberg. But Dahlberg stood his ground and smiled, as if hoping for a fight. Fitz refused to take the bait. Not even Fitz wanted to mess with the guy.

“All right, all right,” Coach Joe said, “that’s enough. Fitzgerald, get back in the huddle. Dahlberg, you do that again and I’ll kick your butt all the way to the locker room.”

“What?” Dahlberg said, arms wide. “What’d I do?” Not even he wanted to mess with Coach Joe.

“You’ve been warned,” Coach Joe said. Then he turned to the Weasel. “You okay, son?”

Sitting up, Wenzel nodded. He tried to shake the pain from his hand. Wenzel was much bulkier than Chris. He spent a lot of time in the weight room. Chris didn’t. This wasn’t supposed to be a job. When he got free time, he preferred to spend it in other ways—even gazing at the stars and beckoning a real angel, when he was allowed.

“You shoulda turned it up field,” Coach Joe said to the Weasel. “Kick in that extra gear.”

“Yes, sir,” Wenzel said. He returned to the huddle, tail between his legs. They all knew that gear didn’t exist, not in the Weasel.

Coach Joe looked at Woz, then at Chris, then back at Woz, as if to say: *That’s what Chris would have done.* “How about giving Russo the ball? Wenzel’s still hurting.”

“He’ll be fine,” Woz said. But he refused to look at Chris.

Chris stood idle next to Woz for the remainder of practice, thinking of the pacing Monster, not far away. The coach didn’t speak another word to him.

Dinner with the Angel

Chris sat in the oppressive heat and suffocating silence at the glass dining table, Victor at one end, in his wrinkled golf shirt, his back turned in spite to the bank of untreated casement windows that offered a full and sun-drenched view of Dr. Samuel's rolling estate. (*How he hates that view.*) Chris and Janey sat on opposing sides of the table as Chris hopelessly waited for the tension to lift while listening to cheap flatware scraping chipped porcelain, and moist mouths chewing hastily prepared food. The sounds irritated and sickened him. But he had no desire to smother those noises by starting a conversation. That would get Victor involved—the last thing Chris wanted. Slipping away from the potential danger was always the first option. Chris was good at that, on and off the football field, with or without the Power. And so he kept his head down and began this real escape attempt in a most dramatic way: he carefully rested his fork on his plate. Then, not daring to wipe the beads of sweat on his brow, Chris waited patiently for Victor's reaction while staring at the table. The table. Another real and humiliating hand-me-down. So too were the mismatched wooden chairs on which they sat. And the mismatched forks and knives—very real, too. Most of their house was furnished this way, furniture from relatives who Victor had long since alienated with his moods and outbursts and drinking. But from the outside, didn't the two-story, brick-facade Chambers of Doom look grand?

It was the second home in which they lived. A storm tore up their first house years ago. Instead of rebuilding, Victor took the insurance money and used it as part of a down payment on a four-bedroom house in a pretentious and appropriately treeless neighborhood (*with jerks like him who hate children*) that his independent sales position could not afford. (*Never really figured out what he does for a living. These days, he calls himself a "manufacturer's rep." Keeps lots of small generators, gears, and roller chains in boxes in the house and garage. But his phone hardly ever rings. So he has lots of free time for "sports," and is gone often. That's okay with me. But he's still a loser. I know what he wants to do with his life, and to us. And I know what to do with him, if I really have to. That, too, is written.*) Victor stuck himself here,

thinking it would make him happier. But the move only made things worse. In Victor's world, pleasure always came before work. Chris had long since noted in the Book that the storm marked the beginning of Victor's slow demise, and—because Victor needed his scapegoats, and money—helped put them in the constant peril Chris and Janey now found themselves.

But tonight, they would feast—on a concoction of ground beef, chopped onions, and kidney beans, blended together with tomato soup and served on a plopp of mashed potatoes. “German chili,” Victor called it, mockingly. Janey called it “mish-mash,” and she loved it. It was Sandra's recipe. Chris liked to resurrect it now and then, when he needed to keep things calm. It seemed to bring all of them a small amount of comfort.

So now, as he did every evening his father decided to come home for dinner (*mostly to check up on me*), Chris tried to gauge Victor's mood. He slowly lifted his head and looked for cracks in Victor's moody face that could foretell the kind of night they would have. Silence was never a good omen. But silence also brought the current escape opportunity. While Victor stared at his plate, far off with his floozies or in the Kingdom of Darkness, Chris hoped to avoid discussing today's events on the practice field. That would only create conflict, and raise the defenses.

“This is really yummy,” Janey said as she picked at her dinner, “but I think there might be too much salt. The soup already has plenty. You should check the ingredients. And maybe next time, you could put in less onions—too onion-ey.”

“Onion-ey, huh?” Chris said, his line of sight drifting toward his sister. “Great word, Janey.” Janey. The Keeper of the Sacred Orb. Sandra's little angel, born on Christmas Day, who must have a better life. Despite the heat, she wore tattered jeans and a frayed pink sweater. Yet seemed cool and in control, even when she wasn't. And not a drop of perspiration on her fair skin. How he wished he could be like that. He decided to run with her innocuous topic. All he had to do was deposit a coin, then sit back and let her go, like the twirling music box angel that she was. He loved that about his sister. Way too happy, even in their fun-filled world, Janey made up for his social inabilities, and kept away unwanted scrutiny. “And the potatoes?”

“Well, now that you mentioned it, they are a little lumpy. I don't think you cooked them long enough. Don't use the hand-masher next time, use the ricer. It'll break up the lumps better. And add more butter and some cream, and—”

“What happened at school today?” Victor said, pulling the plug, his hooded eyes aimed at Chris.

Chris withered under the glare. Instinctively, he glanced at Janey—this time for salvation, as he once did to Sandra. His mother was alive, in Janey. Anyone who knew Sandra could instantly see her in Janey's youthful

face: the small nose and ears, hazel eyes, fine auburn hair—they could even sense her protective disposition, which he missed most of all. Chris, however, was the other Sicilian in the family. He got his father’s hook nose, dark wavy locks, athletic ability, and his “temper,” (*whatever that means*). And when Chris at last fixed his shifting sight onto Victor, he felt as if he were looking into a magical mirror that could show the terrible future, even minus the horns.

“I was named Angel of the Week,” Janey said without a hitch. She pulled her trademark ponytail across her chest and appeared ready to take a bow.

Again with the angels. His suffering was never-ending, too.

Victor dragged his gaze from Chris, then quickly fastened it on Janey. “Angel of the Week, huh? What kinda nonsense is that?”

“It means I get to keep the attendance book.”

“A little girl like you...in-charge of roll call?”

Janey shook her head and repeatedly stroked the ponytail. She was frightened of him, always frightened. That he knew. But she refused to give in, for the sake of that better life. And that he admired, too. “Mrs. Commerford does that. I watch the class when she leaves the room. I think she goes outside to smoke. She always smells like a furnace when she gets back. What a bad habit. If anyone starts talking while she’s gone, I put a red check next to their name. Jenny Mayer got a lot of red checks today. She just can’t keep her mouth shut. I mean, she knows I’m watching her. But she still keeps on talking. And then she gets mad at me when Mrs. Commerford makes her stay after school. I don’t know what her problem is. I think she needs therapy.”

Victor shoveled some chili into his mouth and chewed slowly. He seemed to contemplate each of her words, trying to figure out, as always, any hidden meaning. “Aren’t you worried about becoming a snitch? That’s not a good label, if you know what I mean.”

“Like on a bottle?” Janey said.

Chris allowed his eyes to brighten ever so slightly. Now it was Victor’s turn to act cool when he wasn’t. He set his fork on the table as if it were a card, and he were playing poker with a most formidable foe—which, of course, he was. He leaned forward on his elbows, intertwined his busted fingers, and crunched his hands over his plate. Then he stared at Janey with those all-seeing eyes—directly at the consequences of his womanizing, unwilling or unable to be responsible for his actions, wishing he could take it all back, and knowing that he couldn’t. There was a time Victor smiled, back at the old bungalow, when he was just starting his family and career, when he convinced himself, and them, that everything they wanted would come their way, if they just believed in him. No longer. Now it was all over his face, constantly. He wanted out. They wanted him out, too. But not the way

he desired. “Tattling on people isn’t going to win you any friends. Like you said, it only made her angry. Anger’s not a good thing, wouldn’t you agree, missy?”

Janey stared incredulously at him. Incredulously. “Too bad. She knows better. She needs to shape up.”

“Shape up or ship out, eh Janey?” Victor said.

“Egg-zactly,” she said with a forceful nod.

Victor eased back in his creaking chair and reloaded. “I can arrange that.”

Janey folded her arms and just stared, like Victor.

The battle was on, and Victor was not a man who easily accepted defeat—not when someone attacked his character or “lifestyle.” Victor knew where this conversation would lead. He engaged her in it often, and it always ended the same way. Still, like the salesman that he was, Victor persisted, looking for weaknesses, and hoping to wear her down. “How’s St. Boniface working out for you? Everything going okay?”

“Yep,” Janey said.

“You like your classmates, your teachers?”

Janey nodded repeatedly and tugged on the ponytail. “You know I do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Sure you do. You ask me all the time.”

Victor grumbled but kept his composure. His mind seemed to focus on the canned presentation in his head. “Classes aren’t too hard for you?”

“Haven’t you seen my grades? You never miss anything in the mail.”

“Because if they are,” Victor said, briefly raising his voice, “you don’t have to stay there.”

“I know.”

“I went to public school, got a good education—and it cost a lot less.”

“Yes, you told me that.”

“You’d save us a lot of money if you transferred. I’m already paying for those schools with taxes.”

“You’ve told me that, too.”

“We could do a lot with that money.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“Furnish this damn house, for one.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“I’m doing my best.”

“No, you’re not—not even close. You don’t try. It’s like Mom said. You’re afraid to, like you know you’re gonna fail.”

Chris tried to suppress a sudden laugh, and nearly coughed. He recalled those Sandra words, spoken to no one in particular when she folded laundry

or peeled those famous potatoes. Suddenly, Victor flashed Chris a perturbed look, which always made him cower.

“Mom wants me to stay there,” Janey said.

“Your mom’s not here.”

“Yes, she is. She’s watching over us, just like she promised. She sees everything that’s happening, even now. And I don’t think she likes what she’s hearing.”

The thick vein in Victor’s wide neck throbbed. Threatening words or behavior were never used directly on Janey, not while he was sober. That he saved for Chris. “You really believe all that nonsense?”

“I do, and so does Chris—don’t you, Chris?”

Chris felt the lightning bolts in his head, and cleared his throat. He should have been prepared, once the word “believe” was spoken. “Yeah, sure,” he said, “I believe.” But not the way she thought.

Victor stared at Janey and slowly shook his head. “You’re just like her—gullible to the end.”

Janey threw her ponytail aside and popped up in her chair. “That’s me!”

“I gotta get you out of there before your brain turns to mush.”

Then her expression grew stone hard as she leaned forward. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m not going anywhere.”

Victor grew flustered. His eyes darted back and forth. But he did not explode, which was a good thing for all of them, even though his ego had taken a direct hit. Still, Janey had become secure in her position, knowing there was little Victor could do to force her from St. Boniface. Janey would have to do that mostly on her own, either by choice, or through failing grades. And there was no chance in Hell of either scenario happening.

Victor kept his focus on Janey. He was analyzing, and plotting, and not giving up, for which Chris felt a sudden guilt. Then...a cool inspiration overcame Victor. “I was talking to Pommerance the other day,” he said, “checking on the balance, and I heard some interesting things.”

Pommerance the traitor-lawyer, found at the courthouse, begging for work, after Sandra attempted her one and only inquiry about a divorce. The night following her funeral—after Pommerance informed Victor that Sandra not only had a will that cut him out, but also had been skimming just enough each month for years to pay for a hefty term policy—had been his masterpiece. Victor’s *capolavoro*. Victor didn’t “believe” in insurance, and bought it only when the law or a bank forced him to. It was as if Sandra knew her fate, despite the clean bill of health the required medical exam gave her. Pommerance had also mentioned “sundry items” despite promises not to (hence his need to beg). No doubt, the slip-up helped summon the Monster that night, though his father, until now, never pursued “the treasures” openly. Had the traitor-lawyer inadvertently done it again?

“Really?” Janey said, after a mindful delay. “What kind of things?”
Just like that, Victor had slipped through that otherwise well-guarded Way and was in her face. Chris kept his head down but listened carefully, trying not to show his concern.

“Things of value, little girl. You might call them treasures.”

Chris wanted to scream, to end the inquiry now. But that would only tip Victor off. The Monster was looking for a sign, for any small twitch on Janey’s face, or strain in her voice. It was telling that Victor thought Janey was the easiest route. But Chris had little doubt that he’d be the one to flinch if pressed. Through it all, Chris had to wonder: why hadn’t Victor asked before?

“What kind of treasures?” Janey said. She was talking to a stranger offering candy. Her tone was clear and innocent, her eyes bright and full of wonder.

“Oh...you know, things she may have left you. You know Pommerance. Even though he is a pansy, he’d never lie. Would you?”

“But you call him a liar all the time!” Chris said. “He’s a lawyer!”

With eyes aglow, Victor snarled at Chris, then tried to plaster over the nastiness with a smile. He loomed closer to Janey. “Well?”

“I don’t want to sell her paintings,” Janey said.

“I’m not talking about those goddamn things.”

“What, then?”

“Other things we could sell.”

“You know what she left us. There’s nothing more.”

What a great liar she’s become, Chris thought. He didn’t know if it were a good or bad thing. He always looked at her as his counterbalance.

“You’re putting me in a bad spot,” Victor said.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You think money grows on trees?”

“It does in Heaven.”

“We’re not in Heaven, missy!”

She had seized control by steering him away from the script. And now, an opening that Chris could only dream of, not that he’d take it. But Janey handled it in her own expert way, and with a smile: “See, you’re not wrong all of the time!”

Victor’s anguished sigh signaled that the first part of the battle had ended once again in defeat, their secret safe. Chris struggled to stifle his joy. He admired the way Janey spun Victor into the ground where he belonged—all so innocently. Money...in biblical Heaven. *Jeez, Janey.* Now it had a treasury department? Who, or what, was on the dollar bill? It was her own idea of Heaven, of course, which Chris had dubbed “Janeyland” (in his diary, not to her face), and nearly everything she needed grew on trees. He

had to admit, he liked the idea. If only it were true in this world, then maybe Victor wouldn't be Victor, but the celebrated opera star. And they wouldn't fear for their lives.

But now, as Victor returned his gaze to Chris—the horns momentarily sprouting and curling, the hairy nostrils briefly flaring—it was Chris' turn to defend himself, and his situation was much different. Though Chris also received a trust from his mother's will to continue his parochial education, his stipend wasn't seen as a potential cure for the family's money woes. Football—and the status it could bring—had everything to do with that twisted view.

"Well?" Victor said to Chris, his tone a bit more sour from his stinging defeat.

"Well what?"

"What's going on with tryouts?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing? You're still going, aren't you?"

"You really don't know?"

Victor jammed some mashed potatoes into his mouth and swallowed hard. "This is what I get for letting your mother raise you. Wenzel's a tank. You should've left him in your dust by now. What's the problem? Not enough motivation? I can turn up the heat, if you want."

The flames of Pandæmonium roared to life within its pillared halls. Chris was tempted to lie, but that would only stiffen the consequences. Victor was a de facto member of the Holy Cross Men's Club. Though he no longer subscribed to the "nonsense" and didn't attend their meetings, Victor drank and played sports—and drank—with many of the Horde's fathers, who were members. They talked about their sons as if they were miniature versions of themselves. It was important to know how their male offspring stacked up against the others, to know that they dominated someone—anyone. The bigger the list, the better. "Coach doesn't like me that much," Chris said finally.

"Which coach?"

"Woz."

"Wozniak, you mean—not Woz. Are you causing trouble again? I'll say it once more: go along with the program and do as you're told. I had to ask some big favors to get you that tryout. It's not easy hiding things. You brought nothing but shame on this family."

"Me?"

"I doubt that your mother could have ever forgiven you. Now we gotta deal with it."

Victor loved playing that guilt card, too, not that his father gave a damn about the church—or anything else but himself—anymore. Chris resented him for the play. “I’m not causing trouble.”

“Don’t you lie to me, too.”

“I’m not!” And Victor was not a forgiving man. Just the opposite. The Church Incident (*and that’s all it was—really!*) happened last spring. Chris was doing all he could to make amends, though he still had few regrets. If anything, it made him all the more obstinate. But Victor was still jabbing at him, still punishing him. In his father’s mind, it was always good to have someone in the family fail more miserably at life than he did.

Victor drew closer. “You know the terms.”

“He’ll make it,” Janey said.

“He’s gotta do more than just make it, little girl. He knows the deal.”

Just solve all their problems, in a few days or so.

“He might be a poopster,” Janey said, “but he’s a good little one. I’m always praying for him.”

Stunned by her betrayal, Chris glared for a moment at Janey, but then he extended his hand toward her and nodded. “There, you see? It’s preordained—by the angel of the month.”

“Week,” Janey said.

Victor wiped his mouth with a napkin and tossed it on the table. “Don’t screw this up, Chris—I mean it. It’s your last chance. Or you’re gonna end up like that Cavanaugh punk. And there’s nothing in that will that says I can’t do it.”

Straight to Hell, no doubt. Chris sighed once more, but this time in defeat. This warning was taken seriously, despite Sandra’s attempt from the grave to protect them. (Nothing terrified him and Janey more than being separated from each other. Not even the Monster.) It had always been a contentious subject with Victor, having so much money within his grasp, but forbidden to snatch it. And he could never let that tormenting thought go. Regarding the wording in Sandra’s will, Victor was right. No words forbade him from transferring either of them to another private school, not that it would matter. But he’d do it because he could, just to get back at all of them. It was the one mistake Sandra had made before she died. But Chris had long ago conceded that he only had himself to blame for his predicament.

Victor slowly rose from his chair. “I gotta go pay bills—*school* bills.”

But Chris knew that was a dig, and a lie. Pommerance the traitor-lawyer handled that task, too—yet another contentious point. “Can I use the telescope tonight?”

“Just don’t go wandering off.”

“Like you do?”

“Don’t push me,” Victor said. He snatched a stack of mail from the credenza and stared at the digital thermostat on the wall. He seemed surprised that Chris had not lowered it from its permanent summer setting of eighty-two degrees. He flashed an annoyed look at Chris anyway, then retreated, with the chain dragging, to his study. He closed the door.

Moments later, Chris heard the clinking of ice cubes in a glass, like a fire alarm. Then the Italian opera music (*always Italian, and who cares about the titles?*). He looked at Janey as a bolt of pain shot through his head, and they both sighed. The Story was awakening, the Storm clouds brewing. Bill-paying was always an adventure. More bills than money—the usual case—made for a potentially volatile night. Money problems often demanded great quantities of potion, demonic chants, and sacrificial lambs. And then the late-night atmosphere, so threatening and mysterious, would be ripe for the Monster’s sudden appearance. Chris finally wiped his brow with a paper napkin. He stared at Janey. “Have you ever, ever, in your little-girl life, ever, ever felt that he was ever more mature than you—ever?”

Janey sat motionless and gazed back sadly. With all that wisdom imposed on her, with all of her Janey-isms always at the ready, she never, ever responded to this vexing question. She didn’t dare hear it.

“I don’t know why he ever got married,” Chris said. “Come on, we’d better hurry up.”

“Do I need to worry?” Their precarious future was always on her mind.

“No, Janey. I’ll figure something out.”

Janey smiled weakly and didn’t say anything else. It bothered him that she didn’t believe him—of all the damn irony. She expected failure. But he couldn’t tell her about the tumult that was truly happening behind the solid façade of reality. He just couldn’t. He’d simply have to deal with it on his own and come up with a real plan that would get them out of here for good, without placing Janey in peril.

Chris and Janey repeatedly passed each other to and from the kitchen while they cleared the dining table. Then Chris paused to stare at the painting on the dining room wall. It was his favorite of all Sandra’s paintings: a lamplit village with its meandering stream, thatched cottages, towering pines, a steepled church, and stone-arch bridges, all lovingly frosted with snow. The Dream Village, she called it. (*Victor calls it “kitschy.” He hates all her art—hates anything that brings us joy and reminds him of his failures—and he makes fun of it whenever he can. So he’s out—with the rest of them.*) The Dream Village wasn’t her best work, with all the sharp lines and primary colors and lack of depth, but it was one of her first. And that made it extra-special. Her first thoughts of rebellion, so vividly expressed on canvas for even Victor to see. The beginning of her escape, and theirs. As with all her paintings, it had the “dive-in” quality Chris admired

and appreciated, and could not forget. Every time he stared at one, he wanted to dive in and stay there for a while, just so he could get away from the clomping thing—figuratively thinking, of course—and remove the suffocating pressure he often felt in his chest. Not until the night Sandra died did Chris realize why she had painted the Village. It had been part of her escape plan all along. The Sorceress Artist: Painter of the Magical Light. Maybe somehow (he hadn't solved that part yet, strange concoction that it was), but duly noted in his diary, Sandra was in that winter wonderland, painting in her Studio with those magical brushes and canvases—not drugged and emaciated and outrageously undignified despite her lifetime devotion, but healthy, beautiful again, and safe from the Monster, thanks to the Great Tree. The only problem was: she left them behind, and alone, to deal with a growing anger and a conflicting power.

Chris glanced at Janey. Temptation again, now that he stood before an original that inspired so deeply. Did he dare take her hand, just so she might see? As Chris also noted shortly after the Monster's first appearance, looking for answers—after testing his hypothesis with a few trial runs and watching things vanish, according to the rules—it was Victor's threatening presence that helped Chris unwittingly tap into the Book's power over reality. To open wide a hole in this world—the *White Rose*—as the Way to escape. This controlling power, intended for protection and salvation, was indeed everywhere but unseen, except when a threatening sound like a slamming door or pounding footsteps or a snapped latch or the frantic ringing door chimes helped opened the Way.

Or when he, The Man of Reason, Writer of All the Rules—and out of a former bad habit in times of undue stress—blinked-and-thought really hard where he wanted to go.

Like into a painting.

Like now.

When the thunder died, the Studio appeared, its French doors wide open. Standing in the glowing ankle-high snow as the luminous flakes fell, and dressed in the flannel and leather of the required old-fashioned, Chris felt the delightful heat emanating from the well-lit space. A woman with dark, straight, shoulder-length hair sat at an easel with her back to him. She wore a black painter's smock, and worked carefully before a white glowing canvas displaying a half-finished blue sunflower. She gently dipped the dazzling tip of the brush into the radiant-paint palette resting on a wooden stool to her right. His heart raced again. But he never could approach her—not yet, anyway. He felt as if he were looking at a ghost. And he was looking at a ghost, after all. The last time he saw her face, she lay in a coffin, mummified. The last time they spoke, she uttered her last words in bed. The only sounds of her voice he had heard since then echoed from memories that

haunted his mind. But now, she was painting before him, as if nothing ever happened. Would she really remember him? He wanted that so much from this ghost. It always pushed him—*pushed* him to confront her.

Chris started along the snow-packed walkway that split the slumbering garden in two—and past a line that he had never crossed before. He hoped she would hear his footsteps crunching the snow, so he wouldn't have to speak first, but she continued to paint the sunflower.

Still fearful, Chris stopped halfway. The woman turned her head to the right as if she indeed heard a strange noise. Then she spun around on her wooden stool to face him—at last!

Chris could not take his eyes off her astonished face. “Mom,” he said with a surprising force as the thunder boomed.

“Don't be angry with her, too, Chris,” Janey said, a mere echo.

He was violently yanked back, the particles whizzing past his ears. Feeling satisfied that what was his mother had seen him, maybe thinking that he were a ghost—if only for a false moment, now that the make-believe there had collapsed, and no longer a viable space—Chris watched his sister saturate the tabletop with the plastic bottle of cleaning spray that, since Sandra had so cruelly abandoned them, seemed to be on Janey's person at all times, like a concealed weapon. He still did not understand the science behind all the magic, or how the Other World remained accessible and intact, in its own ethereal way, like some flat spiritual recording that became substantive and three-dimensional only when he appeared in it. But that phenomenon, too, was undeniable. As was the light, flashing or otherwise, so important in the Story.

“You're not being fair,” Janey said. “It wasn't her fault.” She wiped the table with a paper towel.

But it was. All of Sandra's paintings that hung throughout the house had become part of that make-believe sanctuary for them. They had tied their wonderfully harrowing Story to those artworks, and others that, for better and worse, moved him deeply, which he also duly noted. And the tale filled their gloomy lives with light and magic and hope. Then one day, Sandra decided to quit the battle. And this loving young woman who cared for them so much got reckless and died, leaving them alone, and lonely, to battle the Monster. And though the Book and its magic still remained, for those selfish acts, there was no forgiveness, only consequences. This, too, had been duly noted, multiple times, on its own page, with the winds roaring, and the lightning bolts flashing.

Chris closed his eyes carefully, and let out a long breath. Time to beckon a true angel.

Staring into Heaven

The late summer night was rapidly cooling but tolerable as Chris, defying the darkness, deployed the small, refracting telescope and its tripod on the back patio. A sliver of the Moon hung low in the sky, and the wondrous glowing cloud of the Milky Way—a roiling purple, and peppered with silver stars—revealed itself. It was so pronounced, like the giant backbone of some ghostly skeletal creature, Chris could feel its soft light upon his face. The night sky had gone through quite a transformation during the last two years. Once it had been a stage for heavenly creatures. Now it was a cold and voiceless expanse that offered no drama or comfort. But instead of white dots on a black backdrop, the tiny points of light became far-off places that begged inspection, and fueled his wonder. He was fortunate to have that inspection ability. And every time he stared at the stars, he was reminded of that great fortune.

To this day, the telescope was among the best Christmas presents he ever received (a designation that he kept to himself, fearing the consequences). Since Victor did not buy electronic devices for anyone but himself, of course—cable and Internet service for the house, other than in his den, were “out of the question,” as were electronic games and cell phones—Chris and Janey only had their other books, their wild imaginations, and their mother’s art to keep them entertained (the Book was definitely not for entertainment). The telescope came from Dr. Samuel as another hand-me-down. But this one was special. The doctor became an avid stargazer to clear his mind of the medical riddles that often kept him up at night. From time to time, he would invite Chris over to peer into the eyepiece. When Chris first saw the rings of Saturn, he became hooked. But after lamenting that the telescope wasn’t powerful enough to see the galaxies, Dr. Samuel had a roll-off observatory shed built in his expansive backyard (*because he could*). Then he replaced the refracting telescope with a much larger reflecting telescope. But the doctor, a hospital internist, often worked long hours, and rarely made it home before Chris’ imposed bedtime of ten p.m. Invites to the observatory were limited. So on Christmas Day two years ago, just after Sandra’s death, Dr. Samuel’s only daughter, Catherine, their

once-frequent babysitter who helped Sandra develop her love of art, showed up unannounced at Chris' front door with a red bow around the old telescope. Chris had been using the magical device on a weekly basis ever since. Now with Victor in charge of the holiday festivities, Chris knew another such treasure would never come his way.

Chris lowered his gaze to Dr. Samuel's two-story Tudor, its trimmed boxwood hedge separating their backyards. The doctor's estate was part of the original development built decades earlier. These older homes were much larger. Each sat on acres of land with mature trees, and some, like the doc's, had natural ponds and streams. A land speculator, who saw Victor coming, snapped up the farmland that surrounded the old development and quickly built rows and rows of drywall boxes, one of which was theirs.

All the lights were out in Dr. Samuel's home. Not a surprise. But Chris' heart sank just enough to force a sad smile. It was always joyous and comforting to see Katie's home, to know she lived there, that their backyards touched, just as there was joy in writing and whispering her name. And sweet soft waltz-like music that automatically rose up with that name, playing somehow not inside of his head, but all around him—the kind of tune that Sandra used to hum glassy-eyed and with a girlish grin as she whirled in her fineries with Dr. Samuel in the gilded halls of her unattainable, old-fashioned, Victor-less world. Chris would dance and smile with Katie, clutching her tight, holding her dainty free hand just so...if he ever got the opportunity, even though he really didn't know how to waltz. Maybe he did know how...there. But tonight, as the music died, it seemed that a chance meeting with her would not materialize, not that it mattered. She hadn't come over in quite a while. The small break once worn through the hedge had nearly grown over, and she was missing out on the entire love story, with the full soundtrack, always playing somewhere outside of his mind. Naturally beautiful Catherine...Katie Cat Kate...so close...and so beguiling...in every impossible way... And make you do things you wouldn't normally do, in happier times. "Here, Katie Cat Kate." He closed his eyes briefly and took in a steady breath. Deep down, he knew why visits from the immensely popular, older beauty had ended. In accordance with family tradition, he just couldn't admit it.

Chris chuckled at his self-pity, then, ignoring the shadows as they judged and hissed at him, he squinted into the eyepiece. He tried to focus on the yellowish point of light, suspecting it was a planet. He didn't need anymore books to control him. But when his vision would not clear, he withdrew from the lens and rubbed the troublesome eye, careful not to push too hard, giving it enough time to refocus. Concentrating on anything, especially his studies, had been a difficult task since Sandra died. He could stare at whole pages sometimes and not recall one word. Most of the time,

he just didn't care, and his grades suffered. Even now, as he often noted, he felt as if he were roaming in the Kingdom's persistent fog.

The sliding patio door opened and a set of light footsteps approached. He heard his sister whistling a happy tune. Chris gazed into the eyepiece and tried to suppress his smile, but couldn't, though he was perturbed with her. "The whistling pixie," he had called her, before she was cast in her new role. The whistling, more like a warbling tenor trying way too hard to impress, was an accurate health-barometer. Janey often whistled happy songs when she felt good. When she didn't, he grew concerned. Janey put on a good show, much better than he ever could. But Sandra's death had shaken Janey's once-indomitable spirit, though she refused to admit it. As with himself, he suspected she suffered bouts of depression, what little he learned of its symptoms. Some days, it was hard for her to get out of bed (*I know the feeling*). And she would complain now and then about exhaustion and just feeling "icky" (*that I know, too*). Still, Janey had come very far since the Monster smashed Chris' bedroom with its bloody hand and chain. Instead of cowering before him, Janey kept fighting back.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Janey said.

"Your kinfolk," he said, still squinting into the eyepiece. "You know, the ones with the halos, big wings, and red pens."

"Very funny."

"You're funny-er," he said.

"You're funny-est."

Chris turned the focus dial. "Well, that's Heaven up there, right past the Moon. Isn't that what you're always telling me? Or is it past Jupiter, Neptune, Pluto? No? I forgot." He gripped the focus tube and began moving the telescope wildly in all directions. "Maybe its just past Polaris, Andromeda—M87! Where is it, Janey? Where did it go? I...I can't seem to find it? Oh no, we're doomed. *Doomed!*"

"Don't you worry," she said. "I think I can still get you in through the back gate—maybe. If you behave yourself."

Skewering the biblical Heaven and the associated beliefs while experiencing his own intrusions into the New World wasn't a tough task. Both were fictitious. No doubt. None at all. But they had major differences, which he knew well, and caused all the arguments. Chris stood up, shook his head, and sighed as he glared at her, because that was what he had to do. "What were you thinking in there?"

"What do you mean?" She was still in her jeans and pink sweater.

"You called me a poopster."

"Well, you are a poopster—but a cute little one."

"Yeah, nice try."

“Aren’t you the one who’s always telling me to be realistic about things?”

“Not in front of him. All you did was give him another bullet. You knew he was going to be all over me. So what did you do? You took his side. Victor. You *do* recall who he is. I thought we had a pact—right? I take care of you, you take care of me? That’s the only way we’re gonna survive.”

“I was only telling the truth,” Janey said.

“Oh, all right—fine! Pour gasoline all over me, light a match, and send me straight to Hell, Sister Mary Janey. I’m guilty—guilty as charged. Of everything! At least I won’t have to shovel snow anymore—you know how much I love doing that. And the hot dogs—your favorite...mmm, mmm, I can roast them whenever and wherever I want. Can’t wait.”

“You’re such a drama queen.”

“King,” Chris said. He sighed once more, and then tried to collect his emotions. That was difficult, these days.

“I’m worried about you,” Janey said. “You’ve been so crabby—and for a long time, now.”

“Well, don’t I have every right to be?”

“So do I, but you don’t see me losing it. Bad enough we got him scaring away everyone. You keep this up and you’ll become just like Victor.”

“Now you sound like Mom.”

“Well, it’s possible.”

“May I remind you that I am fifty percent Sandra?”

“Amen to that,” she said.

“You’re fifty percent Victor, too, you know. Aren’t you a little worried about yourself?”

“I’m not out to destroy myself like you are.”

“*Who* says I am?” He saw in her widening eyes that his shouting and threatening posture had frightened her, and he became subdued by his sudden guilt. Hurting Janey was a no-no. Chris also worried about the persistent anger. He had never experienced such an intense emotion before. It felt like something else was in him, something bad, ready to burst. That he had, like now, difficulty controlling it only made it more worrisome, because of the Power. But until Sandra’s passing, since he had been so invincible, death had only been something that happened to old people he did not know or care about. Now he was forced to think their thoughts, about mortality, and the hereafter. If he could just ditch the anger, and the incessant anxiety that accompanied it, then he could be somebody, and do wondrous things. “Look, I’m not mad at you.”

“I know.”

He paused to soften his emotions and tone. “So how are you feeling? I haven’t asked you in a while.”

“I feel good.”

“You’re not run-down? Depressed? Getting enough sleep? I’m worried about you, too, you know. You’re not as strong as you used to be.”

“That’s Dr. Sam talking. Maybe you should talk to him. He’s pretty good at that psychology stuff—remember?”

“I remember him being kinda sarcastic and...what was that word Mom always used? Oh, yeah—‘straightforward.’ There’s a funny word. ‘Rough’ is more like it.”

“Like you?”

“And you. I don’t want talk with him, if it’s all right with you.”

“Okay, Victor. Anything you say.”

“Janey—”

“Well? So what about singing?”

“Singing? Where did that come from?”

“I never hear you sing. Even you-know-who does that. It can make you feel better. I’m sure that’s why he does it.”

“He does it because he hates himself and his life—and us—and he wants to be someone and somewhere else—without us.”

“And do you—”

“I don’t want to sing, Janey, okay?”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t feel like it, that’s why. Is this your version of Doctor Sam?”

“Ever try crying?”

“Crying?”

“Yeah, clears out all the yucky feelings.”

“What—on demand? You make it sound like vomiting, and I can’t and don’t care to do that either. That’s a girl thing.”

“So how about whistling?”

“Again, your department.”

“You can start going to church with me again.”

Chris sighed, but said nothing, and let the statement die. He felt guilty about not taking her to church on Sunday. Not because of the rules, but because Janey still believed her way and wanted to attend Mass, but couldn’t—not when the weather was bad, like in winter. Victor didn’t go to church anymore, either. He didn’t encourage it, and he no longer offered to take her. Even Katie, who used to attend with them when Sandra was alive, didn’t stop by anymore to give Janey a ride. Apparently, she was too busy with her new life, and the young men who populated it. *(If that’s what she wants—fine with me. She’ll be sorry, too. Probably is. No doubt.)*

“What about confession?” Janey said.

“Confession? Oh please, I’m so beyond that.”

“Then why don’t you try praying? Maybe your guardian angel can help.”

“Guardian angel? Jeez, Janey, don’t you have homework to do?”

“I did it on the bus.”

“Of course,” he said. Janey, like Sandra, was relentless with the holy advice and the finger-wagging. “Look, we’ve been through this. It doesn’t work, and they don’t exist.”

In the rarest of moments, Janey retreated inward. He knew what she was thinking: the standard old line she always gave him during their heated arguments. She was sad, of course, about Sandra’s death, of course—but accepting (*of course!*) as part of God’s Grand Design for them all. Just like the storm that swept them into the Chambers of Doom.

“I hate what they’ve done to you,” she said. “You can’t stop believing, Chris.”

He defiantly put on his science cap, sensing her doubt, and his victory. “Believing, huh? You mean thought structures?” There had to be science behind all this weird stuff. There just had to. The Grand Experiment had showed him that. And his search would continue despite the pabulum of lies that Holy Cross spooned him.

“I still don’t get that,” Janey said.

“Sure you don’t. You’re not programmed to.”

Janey scowled. “Call it what you want. If you destroy them, you’ll be left with nothing. And I’m just not going to allow that. You saved me twice. Now I’m gonna save you.”

“Is that right?”

“It is. Just like the One your name says.”

But Chris didn’t like his name. He found it embarrassing, and made him feel self-conscious, now that he no longer believed in that old junk. “So who died and made you boss?”

When Janey raised her brows and stared apprehensively at him, he realized just how foolish his stock and insensitive comment was, and he decided to end the debate before he got too emotional and caused his sister more pain. It was a battle neither one could win. “You know, you did good in there tonight, standing up to him. And you didn’t fall for his tricks, either.”

“I know,” she said.

“I wish I were as smart, and strong.”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to be. I can handle him for you.”

Chris shook his head. “Do you know what the Horde would do if they knew my sixth-grade sister was tougher than me?”

“Uh-huh!” she said with her cutesy girlish voice, infused with impossibly high tones. “They’d kick you in the pooter.”

That cutesy voice was intentional. She knew that he knew it was intentional. She didn't use it often, just when she wanted to win an argument, or melt his cold heart. It worked every time. He hated and loved her for it. "Thanks again for your honesty."

"You're welcome."

"Just do me one favor, okay? Don't ever, ever, call me a poopster in front of my friends, especially from school."

"But you don't have any."

"Yeah...well...and whose fault is that?"

"Yours."

Chris gazed at her, thoughtless. "Well, if I ever do and someone does come over to this Hell-hole, just keep that Janey-ism to yourself, please. If the Horde gets a hold of it, kicking will be least of my problems."

A light flicked on in the corner window of the second floor. Chris saw Victor's dark figure standing there like some specter, on the ledge of the Terrible Shrieking Mountain. Victor rapped on the window, then pointed to his watch. At least his father, for the moment, was where he should be, though, in truth, he was feigning parental duty. Victor was all about control—controlling them—hiding things from nosy neighbors, child advocates, and prying eyes. He was probably on his way out to see the perfumed giggling one who liked to smoke and thought that Victor was worth all the trouble. *Whatever*. Tonight, with some luck, that nasty thing from the Story would not show up, slip past the defenses, and sit on his chest while he slept, and he would rest. "Time to get your jammies on. And I suppose you'll want some grammies, too."

"It's your job, isn't it? Part of the Pact? And don't forget the milk—two percent, if he bought more." She headed for the hedge.

"Where are you going, little girl?"

She hiccuped, and sounded like a squeaky toy. "I just want to check."

"Janey, they're not there."

"Are you sure?"

"Would I lie to you?"

Janey whirled around and folded her arms across her chest. Then she stuck out the tip of her tongue and rolled her eyes from side to side. She was thinking hard, gathering evidence, and Chris suddenly realized the grave error of his habitual and clichéd response. He was about to get it, both barrels. He wasn't the only one in the family with "the gift."

"Yes," Janey said finally, the tally completed. "Yes, you would. Yep. No doubt. You betcha. Definitely. Uh-huh. Without question. Yeah...yes...yes, yes, yes. Yes."

"Janey—"

"And that's just this week."

Chris smoldered in silence, and ended his rebuttal. He did not care to hear every word of the account, including the dates and times, which she would eagerly provide—even if he didn't ask.

Janey stood by the hedge break and gazed into the darkness where Dr. Samuel's aerated infinity pond lay. The doctor called it "infinity" because of its figure-eight shape. (*Victor calls it a swamp.*) The many Canadian geese that once populated the pond were gone. To keep the "infernal creatures" away, Dr. Samuel recently added a boxwood hedge around the pond's perimeter, which eliminated nesting areas and discouraged landings. The only access to the water came from the small, stone bridge that arched across the narrow center. Before the hedge was installed, Katie—much to the doctor's dismay—often fed the geese from that bridge, especially in winter when food and open water were hard to come by. Years ago, Janey took up the cause and became Katie's self-appointed assistant. Though Sandra often featured the bridge and the geese in her paintings—she even depicted a girl with a bag of crumbs in one version—Sandra forbade Janey one winter from any future visits after Janey crashed through the brittle ice while attempting to hand-feed the filthy, noisy things. Of course, Janey ignored the edict until the hedge was installed, citing "humanitarian" reasons. But to this day, she remained vigilant.

"Satisfied?" Chris said as Janey approached.

"Just wanted to see. I don't know why he did that. They weren't bothering anybody."

"Ha! Geese are people too, huh, Janey?"

"I thought they were cute."

"You thought they were cute because you're ten times bigger. If you weren't, they'd chase you out of the neighborhood."

Janey strode defiantly past in an obvious refusal to engage him in a science debate. She knew better. "I'm going inside, now. It's chilly."

"Thanks for the weather report."

"Don't forget the cookies."

"Aye aye, sir. Wait—cookies? I thought you wanted grammies?"

She kept walking. "Can't I have both?"

"I'm going to put that on your headstone, you know."

"The way you're going, I doubt I'll die first."

Chris grumbled like Victor, then fell silent.

Janey dodged her nemeses—the "gross, disgusting" bugs swarming about the spotlights—and slipped through the sliding patio door before closing the screen. Chris loosened the bolts on the tripod. Then, moments later, as she had the most annoying habit of doing, Janey began talking to Chris as if he were standing next to her. But all he could hear was a mumble of angry words.

“What?” Chris shouted. He struggled to lift the telescope, which felt like a million pounds. Football was just killing him.

Janey returned to the patio screen. “I said you washed my blouses and your underwear in the same load.”

Exasperated and breathless, Chris set the telescope down. “So? They’re white, aren’t they?”

“They’re delicates. I don’t want them to shrink. Don’t you ever listen?”

“So don’t throw them down the chute with everything else—Sandra!”

“You’re all so much alike,” Janey said. She turned away.

“I heard that,” Chris said.

“I heard you, too!”

Chris drew in a slow, deep breath. Then, for salvation, he took one last look at Dr. Samuel’s house and implored Katie’s appearance, hoping that she wasn’t with *him*. Finally, he gazed up at the sky. Stars, galaxies, the universe. Stupid words, actually—so *stupido*, they made his diary’s List of the dumbest words in the English language. They were part of something far grander than just the universe. He saw it in the Book, despite its magical ways. He saw it in the Story, despite its roots in legend. And he saw it before him wherever he looked, especially now, in the darkness—millions and millions of tiny universes, like glowing orbs, swirling around a flashing black hole. There was a reason, one single solitary reason for this world. One day, he would figure it all out. Then he’d have a nice, long “talk” with all the other *angeli* who couldn’t adequately explain why so many bad things happened while He was on His loving watch.

And they’d tremble with every word.

Chris set telescope inside and, after securing the patio door, he and Janey scampered past the storeroom, making damn sure its door was still barricaded with heavy boxes, before they turned off the dome light and scrambled up to the stifling loft. She closed her bedroom door and connected the unauthorized chain to its track. Victor remained in his den just below them, singing his opera with abandon.

Chris retreated to the kitchen to gather up the promised bedtime snacks. Once in the foyer, he passed the basement door, making sure it was shut. When he returned to the loft, Janey’s door was already opened just enough to see her perspiring face. He handed her the plate and glass of milk.

“I’m sorry I doubted you today,” Janey said.

“It’s okay, Janey. I deserve it.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You know what your problem is? Always looking for the good in people, no matter what they do or say.”

“Sorry,” she said, briefly bowing her head. “I miss Katie. I wish she’d just come back to us.”

“Yeah, well...”

“I didn’t want to say anything before...”

“It’s all right. I get it.”

Janey smiled sadly. “Do you really think you can do it?”

Chris smirked at her sudden flip-flop, sensing her hope in the promise of escape. Felt hurt, too. “Yeah...I do.” Involving real things that he could hold.

She nodded repeatedly, but still looked concerned. “And should I worry? About tonight, I mean.”

“No, Janey, I told you, it’s just a story.”

“And football?”

She was going down the checklist, before she could think of sleeping. “No,” Chris said.

“I don’t want him to take you away.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Janey. I’ll make it, you’ll see. And then things will change.”

“God bless you, Chris, whatever happens.”

“Yeah-yeah, you too, Janey.” Then he echoed Sandra’s words: “Pleasant dreams.”

Janey smiled, brightly this time, which delighted him. Her door closed once more, the chain rattled...and finally, the towel, stuffed ever so carefully, blocking out the strip of yellow light at his feet, leaving no way in—not even for the smallest and deadliest of creatures. He sighed, but couldn’t blame her for her doubt or fear. In a way, this nightly routine was his fault, too—and all the creatures, really. It made him more determined not to fail her on the football field, or with his promises of salvation.

After bathroom routines, Chris entered his room and shut his door—then opened it and checked the hall, just to be sure. He stood there for a moment and listened to the grandfather clock ticking in the foyer. How could he not? The shadows remained stable, diffused, but he still felt something watching. *Childish child, fearful child, childish childish nonsense. Will you ever become a man?* The opera had ended, but Chris suspected that Victor was still there, sitting in the dark, thinking. Funny thing about that Book: it wasn’t so discriminating. And just like Janey feared, despite his reassurances, Chris couldn’t stay vigilant all night, and never really knew when any of the creatures would return, if only for a time. Fictitious or not, they had to be confronted. Always a frightening task. How could he make them finally go away?

Chris closed the door for good. But he made certain that his chain was secure, his towel stuffed in its proper place. He looked to the window,

making sure that the drapes were closed, its rod mended with duct tape, which he always kept handy. Then, off to the closet, reaching to the top shelf to retrieve the diary, buried under a stack of other banished childish things: his Comics. Bauerneinband, full vellum, with gilded spine and borders. Chris ran his fingers over the cover's stamped lettering. *Wotan id est furor*, the very first words said within. Written by one of his ancients who still believed in such things when they made the Book to summon Him in a time of rage, in the land of the Woods and the Mountain that they honored and feared, where the glimmering Temptress beckoned the young and old to join Them, revealing her alluring spectral form so they could feel her deadly thrill. And the foolish Sentinel, dressed in rotted black, warning of horrors much too late before he fled the wrathful Storm. In Baden. Sandra's Baden. Noble Baden. Bad, bad Baden, burnt to the ground by the Turks who wanted the Book for their own evil designs—forever part of her being, and his. Now he was touching the very thing his ancestors touched, and buried, way back then, just before the Turks invaded. He felt its Power flowing as it numbed his hands. All for him to use...when he needed to.

Chris sat on his bed and stared at the Book, now feeling Janey's piercing doubt. Judgment Day was coming. It would be sudden, no warning at all, and he'd have to face it. He sighed once more, feeling constricted, then he stuffed the Book in its traditional hiding place.

After undressing, he slipped into bed and reached up to turn off the lamp. The clock radio was silent, but its red light glared. Power on, and transmitting those recordings. But to where? *Nowhere, nowhere at all*. He opened the drawer and, in the jumbled collection of ink bottles, half-used notepads, and dried-out pens, found the roll of duct tape. He carefully placed a torn strip over the indicator. But he decided to leave the protective lamplight on as he listened for those telltale sounds...

Judgment Day

The next afternoon, Chris approached the equipment counter. Coach Joe checked off a roster name. Chris prepared for his usual greeting, and the stabbing humiliation that followed. But the coach seemed unusually glum. He retrieved Chris' equipment basket and shoved it forward.

"Here ya go, Chris," Coach Joe said. "Good luck today."

Chris stood there for a moment, stunned and frowning. So did everyone else in line. Head-pounding ritual was important to all at Holy Cross High School. Removing it without notice sent up warning flares. So that was it? No mangled Italian? No joking around? Good luck today? Chris grabbed the basket and started for the locker room. He heard the shadow figures in the tunnel hissing their joyful little laughs. Was it his imagination, or did he just receive his last rites, too? Suddenly, Chris felt like he was carrying his remains to the grave. Something definitely was up. So were his defenses.

After he arrived on the playing field, Chris realized that his suspicion was justified. This would not be an ordinary practice. It would not revolve around a scrimmage between the first-team offense and defense. Instead, Coach Woz divided them up according to position—quarterbacks, running backs, and so on. Then, all evening long, Chris faced the Weasel in a strange assortment of competitions.

The first was a strength test with a two-man blocking sled, located on the backline of the end zone. Not the sled in the Story. Nothing joyous or magical about it. Woz stood on the sled and behind the blocking pads, clipboard clutched against his chest with the ever-present whistle hanging around his neck.

"Ready?" he called out.

In a three-point stance, Chris and the Weasel faced the sled. Woz blew the whistle, and the two combatants threw themselves at the blocking pads before falling to the ground. The lightning bolts flashed. He tried to stay calm and thought of nothing. The Horde, which had gathered around, let out their howls for the Weasel.

"Ready?" Woz said quickly.

The whistle sounded. Again, they sprung at the sled. Then again. And again. Crackling. Flashing. While Chris bounced off the pad each time, Wenzel's powerful lunges made his blocking pad's metal springs scream in agony.

"Come on, Russo—hit that sled," Woz said. The Horde groaned and booed at Chris' effort while cheering on the Weasel.

Chris could tell he was losing this contest. The Weasel's side of the sled was farther up the field. Chris grew faint with each lunge. His head felt as if it were splitting open. Even worse, because he had to use his right shoulder for blocking (the arm and hand strength just wasn't there), it felt like it was tearing off. Speed and agility were his talents. Weight room work and summer practice were paying off for the Weasel.

Finally, Woz blew his whistle in a series of rapid bursts. The competition had ended. The Horde cheered. Victory for the Weasel. Woz jotted some notes, then said, "Quarterbacks—you're up."

"Way to go, Cristofori," Fitz said as he lined up before the sled. "Shoulda bet it all on you. You're done."

Chris looked at Coach Joe, who stood among the Horde. He saw the black death spread on the coach's sullen face.



Chris' next competition against the Weasel involved a punt return. This was the most terrifying test of all. Chris and the Weasel stood at the ten-yard-line. Past midfield, Coach Joe removed his fanny pack, then paced side to side with ball in hand. He waited for Woz' signal. Koch and Dahlberg stood on either side of Coach Joe. They were ready to charge toward Chris and Wenzel. Chris hoped the Weasel would receive the punt, but Chris knew Coach Joe would kick it to him. He needed the points.

Problem was: Coach Joe was a former college punter who almost went pro. Those powerful grizzly legs could kick the ball to the Moon. There was no way in Hell a high school freshman could prepare for this manly experience. After all, Chris had been practicing with his pubescent peers. He was onstage again, where the entire world could witness his humiliating failure.

From the bench area of the right sideline, Woz blew the whistle. Coach Joe performed his quick and powerful punting motions. He sent the football spiraling upward with a loud boom! The Horde let out a roar as if watching fireworks on the Fourth of July.

The ball turned into a speck in the yellow sky. Just looking at it made Chris feel wobbly.

"Oh, Hell," Wenzel said, "it's yours, dago!"

Regardless of the Weasel's insistence that Chris take full responsibility for the utter disaster that would eventually descended upon them like a

nuclear warhead, Chris quickly realized that there was no sense in turning from his moment with destiny. He saw the entire trajectory, a bell-curve line from Coach Joe to himself. The ball was headed Chris' way. But he had to catch the damn thing first. If not, the ball would land with an embarrassing thud, bounce high into the air, and be snatched by one of the two devil-dogs charging down the field. Ultimately, Chris would be blamed for the fiasco, and he would fall farther behind in the contest—his confidence, already in short supply, crumbling to dust, the Book's controlling power becoming edgy.

Chris stared past the top edge of his opaque facemask and tried to decipher the exact trajectory of the ball, which was just now re-entering the upper atmosphere. Keeping his eye on the football, Chris stepped forward a few paces—then determined, much to his dismay, that the ball would land somewhere behind him. Chris backpedaled, slowly at first, then faster and faster as he realized just how far Coach Joe had kicked it. Chris lunged backward—but the furiously spiraling ball streaked through his outstretched arms, singeing them. He looked down in horror, expecting the worst.

The ball bounced into his gut.

Chris clutched the football and turned to see Koch and Dahlberg thundering toward him, kicking up dirt and grass. Chris gazed at the Weasel, who stared back in amazement at Chris' good fortune. Then Wenzel turned up field to try to block the devil-dogs. Chris quickly followed as he sized up his attackers.

What happened next took but an instant. But to Chris, time halted, freezing everyone and everything in place, as if he had hit a universal pause button. The practice field became a chessboard. The players became chess pieces. He saw everything from high above. He could rearrange the chess pieces and try different strategies. If they didn't work, he'd put everything back and try again. Patterns, connections, frozen orbs and particles—he saw them all. When he was confident he had chosen the right set of moves, Chris hit the start button, and the entire universe hummed into normal motion.

The four converged at the ten-yard-line. The Weasel struck first, as expected, taking Dahlberg out with a vengeance-filled body block to the crazy kid's knees. Dahlberg cartwheeled to the ground. The Horde howled its approval.

That left Koch to zero in on Chris.

Chris ran straight at Koch—so close, he saw his beaming eyes. The Horde screamed and hollered, anticipating the violent, one-sided collision between the brute and the wimp. Just as Koch was nearly upon him, Chris took a step to the right. But Koch didn't flinch, and kept coming. Chris jukeed left, planting his left foot near the sideline. This time, Koch took the bait and shifted his line of attack, refusing to slow his powerful charge. Now

Chris, with much less mass and force, had Koch right where he wanted him, according to plan, turning a negative into an advantage, the laws of physics (which he doubted they knew existed) in control. Koch leaped at him. Chris stopped and spun on his right foot like a turnstile. Koch flew past Chris, brushing his shoulder, then tried to slow his momentum. Instead, he tumbled to the ground. The Horde groaned as Chris streaked past Coach Joe toward the opposite end zone, the flat brown expanse of the empty field in his triumphant view. How he wished he could keep on running.

“That’s uh-my little bambini,” Coach Joe shouted. “Fantasti-*cato!*”

Woz’ frantic whistle ended Chris’ temporary flight to freedom.

Woz motioned with his arm for Chris to return to the right sideline. “Come on, kid,” Woz hollered, “you’re holding things up.”

Chris sprinted to the bench area. There, the Horde congratulated the Weasel for his block on Dahlberg. “Payback time!” Fitz said to Wenzel. They bumped fists and high-fived each other.

Woz offered a rare praise. “Nice going, kid,” he said to the Weasel. As the Horde began to sing that horrible Amore song, Woz looked at Chris. “You’re lucky.”

Chris was shocked at the cool response. Despite his triumph on the field, he had fallen farther behind Wenzel—down, and almost out.



So this is it—the final test, Chris thought on the sideline while Coach Joe spoke to the silent Coach Woz at midfield. It was dusk. The vapor lights on Pine Street had just flicked on and buzzed as if in his ears. One last chance to make an impression, score some much-needed points, and somehow beat the Weasel. But what kind of a test would it be? Even if he won the last contest, Chris doubted it would be enough to overcome Wenzel’s two victories. Chris needed a miracle. Otherwise he would have to face his father. Forced into that perilous situation, Chris doubted he could hold it back.

Coach Joe broke away from Woz and headed for the end zone. He brushed past Chris, and knocked him slightly off balance. Chris turned to see Coach Joe flash a look of warning. Then, positioned at the orange pylon where the goal line and right sideline met, Coach Joe withdrew a stopwatch from his fanny pack. On the left sideline, at the other pylon, the trainer stood with his stopwatch. This was going to be official. Then another sign: Coach Joe nodded at Chris with a knowing grin.

Chris’ eyes brightened, and he shivered with anticipation. The buzzing stopped. He couldn’t believe his sudden fortune. This kinda stuff only happened in the movies—and never to him. Would he choke?

Woz blew his whistle. “All right—running backs,” he said, “take your position on the forty-yard-line.”

Some of the Horde let out their bays. The others kept silent, and not so sure. When it came to the so-called skilled positions, the running of the forty-yard dash was the gold standard, the ultimate contest. Forget craftiness, weight room dedication, team spirit. Deep down, everyone knew those traits were minor compared to blinding speed. Who could run the fastest? Breakaway speed. That's what really mattered. Woz, Coach Joe, the Horde—they all knew it. Just like they knew who was going to win the race. If he didn't screw up.

And so now, suddenly, one by one, the cheers began to falter. Feeding off their fear for once, Chris slammed on his helmet and jogged to the center of the field. He took his position on the forty-yard line and glanced to the sideline. Koch shook his head, while Fitz gritted his teeth and tightened his right fist. Even Woz seemed resigned to the outcome. Payback time, no doubt. But he still needed a miracle.

The Weasel joined Chris at the forty-yard line. He looked worried.

"Good luck," Chris said. Just for a moment, he was back at St. Boniface, standing at one end of the asphalt playground, victory waiting for him on the other side.

"Yeah," Wenzel said, already deflated.

"Get ready," Woz shouted. He grabbed his whistle.

Chris crouched just behind the chalk line.

"Get set."

He thrust his right hand down to the moist grass, assuming a sprinter's stance.

Then Woz blew the whistle.

For a split second, the Weasel took the lead as Chris slipped out of his stance. But that was the extent of Wenzel's moral victory. Chris had always been a slow starter in most everything he attempted. But once he reached his stride, Chris felt as if he were running downhill, almost weightless, with rocket engines roaring.

"*Andari, andari!*" Coach Joe said.

Chris also heard the hopeless calls from the Horde, urging the Weasel to give it his all. It didn't matter. Chris quickly pulled away. He widened the gap with every half-second. The cheering sputtered as Chris flew past the goal line. The Weasel chugged ten yards behind.

Chris spun around the goal post to slow himself down. Gasping for breath, his hands on his hips, Chris saw Coach Joe and the trainer converging in the end zone, comparing stopwatches. Then they stared at each other in disbelief. Coach Joe charged toward Woz. He held the stopwatch high in the air.

“Four-three-seven,” Coach Joe said, “four-three-seven!” He held the watch to Woz’s disbelieving face. Woz’ eyes flared before returning to their normal suspicious stare.

“That’s a school record,” Coach Joe said, almost breathless. “Jesus Christ, Coach, I never saw that in college! You know what you got on your hands here, don’t ya?”

Woz turned a burning gaze on Coach Joe.

Coach Joe lowered his head slightly and turned down the enthusiasm. “You gotta do it, Coach. You gotta.”

Woz nodded, but looked befuddled. He waited patiently for the uproar to settle, thinking hard. Then he stared at Chris for what seemed to be an eternity, regret now dominating his expression. “All right, kiddies, it’s getting late. Let’s huddle up.”

Chris jogged to the bench area. The Horde, shrinking and cowering, parted like the Red Sea. Everyone was in shock. Not even Fitz dared to look at him. For once, Chris felt proud, like a man among boys. A strange sensation, no doubt.

“When I call your name,” Woz said, “take your position on the fifty-yard line.”

Then Woz began naming the starters for each position, slowly assembling the first team at midfield. Applause and shouts rose after every announcement.

“Jim Koch,” Woz called out. “Thomas Fitzgerald.”

Koch took his place at left end while Fitz stood behind the center, each greeted with ape-like grunts and fists held high.

One last spot remained.

“Christopher Russo,” Woz said, stuttering, as if he were forced to call out the name.

Chris ran out to take his place behind Fitz. A mild applause with a smattering of boos filled the air. Didn’t matter. He was happy, for Janey. It was a strange feeling. After all, he had accomplished his goal.

“All right...men,” Woz said, “I’ll keep this short. I want to congratulate the starting team for their fine work and effort. But we have a lot of work to do next week. Mount Carmel’s going to be a tough test. They’re bigger than we are—but we have grit, cunning...and speed. And I expect we’ll have them in tears by halftime.”

The Horde began howling in that animal way that was forever inscribed as part of their destiny.

Woz held up his right hand to silence them. “Rest up tomorrow. But I want everyone on the field one hour early the next day. We’ve got some new plays to learn.”

Woz said his closing prayer, then everyone broke the huddle and headed for the locker room. Chris jogged with them, helmet in hand. He saw everyone parting around Coach Joe, who stood on the sidelines holding the watch as if it were a souvenir. He waited for Chris to approach. “I know, I know,” Chris said, maintaining his pace. “You really don’t have to call me your little bambini anymore.”

Coach Joe jogged alongside him. “Damn right I don’t, not after what you did out there. Do you know what I’m gonna call you now?”

Chris shuddered to think. He and Coach Joe stopped. Then the coach held up his hairy arms and slowly moved them independently as if they were two spotlights shining on a theater marquee. “Tonight, you became Cristofori Russolini, football *dio-missino*. How does that sound? Amazing, huh?”

“Yeah, Coach,” Chris said. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Coach Joe slapped Chris on the shoulder and laughed robustly, nearly knocking Chris over. Then they ran with the team toward the locker room. It felt funny, running with the Horde—with all the scary things that escorted them, their dagger-like teeth, curly black claws, and featherless wings. Immersed now in their fantastic numbers, treading on the great Boiling Black Cloud, Chris could feel their seductive power, their terrible invincibility. But he didn’t see how he could stay with them, knowing what could be their fate, if he wanted it to be so.



A football god, Chris thought as he sat in front of his locker. For winning a foot race? Talk about stupid. What was wrong with people? Why was this a big deal? Was everyone at school suddenly smarter? Better looking? Healthier—just because I ran a four-three? What? He settled his thoughts, and allowed himself to grasp a little joy from his victory. Maybe now Fitz would be kept at bay. Even better, Victor would be off his back—until Chris failed to fulfill some other grand expectation. But now he had to commit to the honor. And perform in a game that counted. What if, with all those bright lights and cheering crowds—with all those teachers and students and parents thinking he was really good—what if he short-circuited? Forgot all the plays? Or even one? And Fitz pitched the ball to someone on a power-sweep right, but that someone wasn’t there because sometimes in his flip-flopping mind left was right and right was left and he had turned the wrong way when everyone else went the other? And the ball just sat there on the damp field with all those lights shining on it. And all those people in the stands with their mouths wide open, wondering what in Hell is going on? And the other team scoops up the ball and runs it in for a touchdown? And that one missed play becomes the difference in the game? And they lose the first of many games to come—games they’re

supposed to win because he's so talented? And it's all his fault? That was possible—no, probable. No, it was going to happen. Always did, under those circumstances. *Damn*. He hadn't won anything at all, just another set of problems he couldn't handle. Life was never more confusing, or frustrating.

"Hey, dago," Fitz said as he approached from the right.

Chris slammed his locker door, then stood to face his quarterback. Chris saw the fur standing on Fitz's scalp, his evil brown eyes shriveling into black sockets.

"We need to find a new name for you after that performance, don't ya think?" Fitzgerald said.

"What do you want, Fitz?"

"Maybe the dago flash? Or how about the dago thief? Yeah, that's better—says everything, don't you think? We both know you stole that spot from Wenzel."

"I didn't steal anything," Chris said.

"Weasel was way ahead before that bogus forty-yard dash."

"Bogus? You're whacked. I coulda done better, but I slipped."

"How much did you pay Coach Joe to stage that, huh? I mean, why's he so obsessed with getting you that starting position?"

"Maybe I'm a better tailback."

"Yeah, and maybe it's your tail. You doin' something for him that you shouldn't, butt boy?"

Chris felt a chip of his mind flying off. "Go away, Fitz. You lost. Again."

Fitz drew close and pointed a finger at Chris' chest. "How about this word?" he said. "*Busone*. Ever hear your old man call you that? I know he has. My old man told me. Yeah, he did. Vittorio knows what you're all about. We all do."

Chris' teeth clenched. The thought of Victor collaborating with the Horde and insulting him behind his back—his own offspring!—made his blood boil. It shouldn't have surprised him, and he shouldn't have cared. But he did.

And then Fitz drew even closer and got real nasty-looking, showing his blackened teeth. "You think this is over? You think you won?" He shook his head. "You might have fooled Woz, but you can't fool me. I know what you're made of. I went to Boniface—remember that little fact? So I know sure as Hell that you're no football player. You coulda stood on the sidelines with your helmet in your hand like all those other second-string losers, fetching us water when we wanted you to. But you just had to show me up, didn't you? Had to prove—once again—that you're smarter than me, that you can beat me. Well, you're not, dago—and you can't. This is my team. I make all the rules. Weasels' gonna be the starting back. And you're the one who's gonna get a beating."

Chris shook his head in disgust. Fitz was doing his best to revive old memories and resentments. But the villain in Fitz' version was much different than the one in Chris' mind. That was the heart of the problem between them: St. Boniface. And not just the Church Incident. The Grand Experiment really irked Fitz. That had made him feel inferior, made him feel left out. And he was particularly jealous of Chris, who had worked his way up, just like on the football field. Chris searched for a clever response, and snatched one from a deposed ally. "Why don't you let all of that go, Fitz, okay? Just let it go."

"Oh, now you're a shrink? Dumb—really dumb. You see, I already know what's going to happen to your glorious football career. Ain't gonna have one much longer. And do you know why?" Fitz opened the locker and reached up for Chris' playbook. But before he could snatch it, Chris slapped at the door. Fitz was fortunate to remove his hand before the door slammed shut.

"You're not taking that," Chris said.

"Oh, we're not going to take it. You're gonna give it to us. That oughta make that drunk you call a father real happy, huh, mamma's boy?"

Fitz shoved Chris, knocking him a step backward. But Chris quickly regained his balance. He was scared and angry at the same time.

"Want to call your mommy?" Fitz said, looking encouraged, his aggressive tone escalating. "Oops, sorry, I forgot. You ain't got no cell phone, do you?" He laughed. "And you ain't got no *mamma mia*." He laughed even harder, and longer. And nothing about that joy seemed insincere.

Chris' temper flared, and he tightened his right fist, tempted to strike. There was too much bad blood between them, too much hate, for Chris to back down completely. This was one jerk Chris would fight, if he had to, regardless of the obvious and painful consequences. But he didn't retaliate. That's what Fitz wanted. Again, there was a higher power at work in Chris' mind. *Might as well be wearing a collar and some jingling tags*, Matt had said about their nemesis. *Stay cool. That'll get him*. The Power could, too. "You'll have to catch me first," Chris said to Fitz. "You've never been good at that."

"We're not in grade school anymore, *goombah*," Fitz said, holding up his oversized fist. "You're battling real men out there."

Chris saw the thick, dark hairs on Fitz's fingers, how they looked like quills. "Coach Joe won't go for it." He heard the hint of fear in his words, could feel himself slipping. That stoked his anger once more, and his eyes flared as the last of his wariness evaporated.

Fitz laughed boldly. His fist fell to his side. “Yeah, dumb-dumb Joe. He never could hack it. That’s why he’s here, asking for more. He won’t have anything to say—not a thing. He’s a fool, and a tool, just like you.”

“Wrong again—Fitz. Aren’t you getting tired of that?”

Fitz tried to shove Chris once more, but Chris snatched Fitz’ wrist. The anger stood firm. He was ready. Consequences still didn’t matter, nor did the Vow. They hardly came to mind. Only his Story, and the roles they both played. Chris stared intently, confidently, as Fitz began to frown. Chris saw his angry reflection in Fitz’ glassy wide eyes, felt the Power crackling all around him, tingling his skin. He had had enough. “*Åsgårdsreien!*” he roared with a power and depth that he had never heard.

The lightning flashed...

...the thunder boomed.

And then?

Climbing a bed of broken rocks, they burst through the boiling blanket of fog to gaze in awe into a harsh new realm, dark and wild and forbidding. The Terrible Shrieking Mountain, which from a distance, within the Village, always looked smooth and placid with the drifting clouds at its benign peak, now showed its monstrous side. The full Moon, high above the vent, shined a harsh and glancing light on the Mountain’s scoured face where nothing dared to grow, and cast shadows in the deadly chasms from which shrieking and moaning and a thunderous pounding rose. The vent was gaping and angry, frozen in an eternal roar. And a flaming orange glow illuminated its scarred inner walls. Chris looked at Fitz who was dressed in his black robe, his hideous face partially hidden in the darkness of his hood. “Home sweet home,” Chris said.

“What in Hell...?”

Another flash, another boom, and they stood firmly on the concrete floor of the locker room. The shadow figures scattered. Fitz stared back, his expression twisted, his eyes afire. He yanked his arm from Chris’ grip. “What in Hell, dago?”

“Happy now?” Chris said as the thunderous echo waned. Fitz would recall the flash, for sure. And maybe, within that flash, something more. Chris studied Fitz’ confused expression, looking for signs. *Lucky, lucky Fitz.*

But Fitz, being Fitz, quickly regrouped. He snickered at first, then hesitated as he, too, seemed unsure about what had just occurred. Finally, he grinned in his rotted, sickening way—the way he would have every day.

If Chris had made him a lie.

“Okay, flash,” Fitz said, his angry tone crippled as at last he stepped back, “see ya on the practice field.”

“Sure, Fitz,” Chris said. “Anything you say.”

The Fallen

With backpack in hand, Chris found his way to the bike rack as the last bands of the pink and orange sunset melded with the encroaching mass of deep blue just above the treetops on Pine Street. This evening didn't seem as scary, even with the lonely trip ahead of him. But the good news he carried did little to stop Fitz's threat from bouncing around in his head, and he renewed his will not to give up. Not just because of Janey and the lessons she taught him. He couldn't let Fitz and the Horde win. That catastrophe would not make the world a better place, no matter what form they were in. Maybe that little detour to Hell had helped, if Fitz saw or recalled it. But now that his anger had subsided and a cool reality set in, Chris saw the danger in this decision. It was too easy for Chris' scrawny body to get hurt playing a game that reveled in the violence that he was so against. Accusations of foul play after-the-fact would be useless. He could go to Coach Joe and reveal the threat. But as Fitz had correctly pointed out, what could the coach do without proof?

"Chris, is that you?" a familiar voice shouted. "Hey Chris, wait up!"

Chris slipped on his backpack, and then turned to see a stocky figure approaching from the cafeteria doors where a handful of scoundrels sauntered from detention into the dusk. "Hey," Chris said with reservation to Larry Witosz, taking note of his former friend's navy-blue tie, how the narrow blade was tied much longer than the wide one—no doubt, intentional. Chris scanned the parking lot for potential spies and demons before returning his gaze to Larry. "What's up?" He really didn't want to know, but felt bound out of a former loyalty.

Larry grabbed his rusty bike and walked it toward Chris. "Maloney let us out early. Guess he was feeling sorry for us."

"I doubt that," Chris said. He marveled at how much Larry, with his permanent five-o'clock shadow, looked like Coach Joe, only smaller, and dimples in his baby-fat cheeks. The coach had tried to get Larry interested in football. But when Larry, who with his stout frame certainly looked like he belonged, spewed his smart-ass reply—"I don't hang with Neanderthals"—Coach Joe nearly fainted.

“Where ya headed?” Larry said.

“Home. I gotta get going. Janey’s waiting for me.” And Victor.

“Mind if I tag along?”

Chris shrugged, but he wanted to say “yes.” “Let me start out first. You can catch up. But if you see an old, black BMW—“

“I know what to do,” Larry said.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Chris looked to his right at the lifeless church, then squinted into the growing darkness. The returning sounds didn’t surprise him all that much, considering what they had just discussed.

“Problems?” Larry said, not sounding too concerned.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

“Let’s get going.”

Chris headed south on Pine Street, passing along the crowded row of lamplit bungalows, refusing to look back. Larry caught up with him at the next illuminated intersection, well away from the parking lot.

“So what have you been doin’ with yourself lately?” Larry said as they continued riding, his tie flapping over his shoulder. “You never talk to me anymore.”

“I can’t.”

“Still reading those loony Ragnar novels?”

“They’re not Ragnar novels. They’re fantasy stories.” Chris hadn’t read one in a while. Sandra used to buy them for him, and they helped him write the Story. And like that story, fantasy novels offered him an escape, however edgy they might be. Now, to get the latest greatest, he often had to put his name on a waiting list with all the other cheapos at the public library. More embarrassment.

“Never could understand why you went for that sword-and-sorcery crap,” Larry said, “you, of all people.”

“Yeah, well, tell me you don’t feel like you have to draw your sword and start hacking away the minute you wake up.” No swords in the Story, though, or knives. Not anymore. Personal reasons. Larry giggled, but Chris was serious. “You don’t live my life, do you?”

“No?” Larry said. “How soon we forget.”

The dust from the past settled, and they continued on through the darkness, legs pumping, wheels spinning, a warm breeze ruffling their hair.

“I heard you made the team,” Larry said. “First team, too. Oh yeah, and something about a school record.”

Larry had a special talent to make vaunted accomplishments sound foolish. “Yeah, so? What of it?” Chris said.

“Nothing.”

“Yeah, right. Go ahead and say it.”

“Say what? You made the starting team. Goody-two-shoes for you. That’s just AWE-some...*dewd*.”

“Stop.”

“What?”

“You know. I don’t want to be awesome or dude.”

“So what’s next? A baseball cap on backwards? How about a nice flame tattoo across one side of your face? That’ll open the doors. Nothing like advertising how desperate you are for attention and acceptance. Or—hey!—maybe a goatee.”

“You don’t have to worry about that last one any time soon.”

“Yeah, well, I never thought you’d fall for all that mindless rah-rah stuff either.”

“It’s not rah-rah stuff—”

“Right.”

“—and I didn’t fall for anything.”

“Then why in Hell are you rollin’ around with those apes?”

Chris slammed on his brakes. They both skidded to a halt in another lighted intersection and faced each other. The long, deep shadows on Larry’s face made him appear decrepit. “Look, not all of them are apes—and you know why.”

“Yeah—but first team? ‘Going the extra mile?’ ‘Winning one for the old Gimpster?’ That’s Horde-speak, man. Fitz talks like that. You don’t—at least I didn’t think you did. What happened to you, Chris? You sure have changed.”

“Fitz pissed me off, so I got back at him.” It sounded reasonable. And tough.

“Fitz? Well, there’s a surprise. So why don’t you just quit?”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can.”

“No—I can’t.”

“Why not?” Larry said.

Chris sighed. Though Larry’s old man—a baker—had him by the balls as well, Larry was still in the St. Boniface experimental mode, using a simple but effective argument technique to make a quick but profound assessment of Chris’ situation. “Look, I’m sorry.” Chris said. “I know what you’re trying to do. But the old gang is dead. And I can’t come back.”

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Chris gazed north again, past the bug-infested cone-shaped islands of lighted intersections—and once again to the darkened church. *Maybe that’s where they hid. Certainly would make sense.*

“What?” Larry said.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

“It’s nothing.” He was certain that Larry was unaware. The hoof beats were much too faint, even in the dusky stillness. Only an expert ear could detect it. But Chris’ heart raced a little harder. Though slow, the clomping was drawing near, and did not cease.

“Then don’t keep doing that!”

They started riding—faster this time, to distance themselves from the creatures, which seemed bent on contact, in the dark, when he was most vulnerable. All he had to do was look at them to give them the substance and the power that they craved. Chris didn’t want to give them the chance—certainly not now, with Larry looking on—but kept mindful of their approach.

When they finally reached the point where the troubling sounds ended, Chris turned his attention to Larry. He felt sad for his old friend. High school was much more difficult for him. Plucked from the nest, tampered with, then betrayed, Larry was let loose without re-indoctrination on the unwitting freshman class of Holy Cross High School. Even the faculty didn’t know what to make of his belligerence. More so than Chris, Larry was isolated from the herd, shivering in the cold, and slowly starving. Maloney, the school’s ever-hovering sergeant-at-arms, often picked Larry off—in the halls without a pass, wearing jeans instead of creased blue trousers, or just for being late for school. Larry was on the fast track toward expulsion again. Victor had warned Chris many times to stay away from his former “degenerate” friends. Victor knew all about that word. And it was part of their agreement. Larry had no role in the Story—none of his former friends did. He liked them too much, still thought of those days fondly, to do such a thing.

“He’s coming back,” Larry said.

“Who?”

“Cavanaugh.”

Chris felt uneasy, but intrigued. “When?”

“Around Thanksgiving.”

“How’d you find that out?”

“The turd wouldn’t return any of my calls or letters, so I went to see his old man.”

“How’d that go?”

“Fine. He was cool. Almost seemed happy I stopped by.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“Why?” Larry said. “We didn’t do it.”

“Yeah, but we were there.”

“So?”

“So? Look at us now. Life treating you okay?”

“Well, let’s see,” Larry said. He rubbed his chin stubble. “I get up every morning at two-thirty—two-thirty! Hell, we used to come home sometimes by then. And the next thing I know, I’m up to my elbows in unbleached flour. It’s like dust, and it’s all over the place, like a frickin’ cloud. You know what happens when you breathe in that stuff all morning long? It starts coating the inside of your nostrils like snot—all gooey and sticky. Who knows what it’s doin’ to my brain? Might explain a lot of things, right? And my old man thinks I’m gonna take over the business. Of course, we have lots of old ovens...and insurance. Maybe I can get you to rig something up for me. Your brain’s good at that. I’ll even give you a percentage.” Larry smiled and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Oh, man,” Chris said. He slowly shook his head.

They looked at each other—and, suddenly, they began to laugh half-heartedly. And just for a moment, the tension between them melted, and they were back atop their little world, back in the days when they were cooler and smarter and so much wiser than everyone else, and could get away with anything. But when the laughter ceased, the crushing silence returned, and they continued their ride without speaking another word. Chris knew that Larry secretly wanted that old life back. Being a rebel had its serious consequences, just as Matt had warned them. But Larry, like Chris, was too stubborn to admit it aloud.

They reached the four-lane highway that ran parallel to the elevated railroad tracks. Then they turned into the poorly lit parking lot of the Lowenbach Funeral Home where Sandra’s wake had been held. Instinctively, Chris’ eyes locked on the building’s portico, and for an instant he saw her casket being shoved into the back of the hearse. His mind began whirling as a kaleidoscope of more related sights and sounds vied for attention. The shadow figures seemed intrigued.

They stopped near the curb. “You okay?” Larry said. “You look like you’re going to hurl.”

Chris’ head still felt as if it were dancing. This particular point in the universe was always a tough place to be. “Yeah, sure.”

“I gotta hand it to ya. I don’t think I could come by here if I were you.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have a helicopter, so you get used to it.”

“So what are ya thinkin’? Anything you want to share, or should I keep my mouth shut for once?”

“What this all about?”

Larry shrugged, and tried to look innocent. “Just talking.”

Too humble. Too caring. Still trying to worm his way back in. “It’s nothing.”

“Bad memories, huh?”

“Not really—just something Matt said to me when she was dying, something I think about a lot.”

Larry nodded. “More pearls of wisdom from our fearless, incarcerated leader? I can’t imagine he said anything that helped, not that I could.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“It’s not, huh?”

“We were in the church, looking at the paintings—”

“Uh-oh.”

“—and we were talking about magic.”

“Magic? You mean like capes and wands and flying broomsticks?”

“I was complaining that there wasn’t any.”

“Complaining? Jesus Christ, starman, we’re on a spinning speck of dust orbiting a giant fireball of gas that’s traveling at seven hundred thousand miles an hour through an endless frickin’ vacuum—and you’re looking for magic? Really?”

“I know, I know,” Chris said. Larry’s observation was common among the Hotshits.

“You gotta stop reading that kiddie crap. Don’t you think he’s right, that it really matters what’s in your head? You’re not a Butthead, you’re a man of reason. I thought you were on-board by then.”

“I was.”

“I guess dealing with reality can be tough. Look what it’s done to Fitz.” A smile spread on Larry’s face, but Chris did not respond to his shatter-the-gloom attempt. “So lay it on me. What’d he say?”

Chris shrugged, still hesitant. “He reminded me of a lot of magical things, just like you did.”

“Yeah, such as...?”

Chris paused to scan Larry’s stout face. There didn’t seem to be any insincerity in his friend’s baggy eyes. Chris raised his right hand and pinched his thumb and forefinger together. He saw a speck of dirt beneath his index fingernail. “The universe was once this big.”

“And that’s what mesmerized you? What does that have to do with your old lady dying?”

Embarrassed for letting his guard down and allowing Larry a rare look into his troubled mind, Chris lowered his hand and retreated inward. Old ways died hard in them both.

“I gotta tell you, Chris. I think I’m weird—but, man, you got me beat by a mile. Maybe you’ve been staring into that telescope too long.” There was no real contempt in his words. Larry was that unwittingly insulting to all his friends, what little, if any, remained. It was...Larry, toxic byproduct of the Grand Experiment. He glanced left and right as he prepared to cross the

four-lane highway. “Good luck with that football thing. Maybe I’ll see you in the cafeteria some evening.”

“I hope not,” Chris said, “or you’ll see me here, too.”

Larry shook his head. “Not allowed.” Then he slipped through a break in the traffic and crossed the road, disappearing like a phantom beneath the darkened viaduct. Chris’ line of sight shifted higher. Just beyond the tracks loomed the abandoned wood-cribbed grain elevator made famous in one of Sandra’s paintings, and infamous by one of Matt’s ill-fated get-rich-quick plots. Chris stared for a moment as it drew him in, the Power buzzing and crackling. A great place to hide things, if they needed hiding. He thought of what might have been, then quickly turned away.

Chris was about to head up the wide, concrete sidewalk that ran past the small illuminated shops along the north side of the highway. But then he gazed back once more at the glass doors of the funeral home, and fell into a morbid trance. A school day did not pass when he couldn’t think of himself standing in stunned silence over her as she lay in that coffin. Dead. They knew that day was coming. He was certain his tears would flow, as they did from Janey. But then, when it happened... There had been plenty of flowers delivered, complete with sympathetic notes on tiny cards. But what about all those empty rows of folding metal chairs? Sandra had only one sibling, an unmarried sister named Monika. But she had died suddenly years earlier. *Dead dead dead*. Still, there was church and friends. Where were they? Why didn’t they come? But he knew who to blame. He chased everyone away—especially first real loves. So on that horrible day, reality slapped him hard across the face, and Life was added to the list, as the word ceased to make any sense to him. As for death, it now seemed to be everywhere, affecting everyone—it’s a miracle anyone’s alive. And it caused him to ask many strange questions for which he received much scorn, but for which no one had any satisfactory answers. That only made him all the more frustrated and angry, and had put him on his quest to figure it all out on his own. For thirty-eight years, Sandra had been a living, breathing human being, creating thoughts and beliefs, collecting memories, the body being just the device to keep all the information flowing and churning. So where did it all go? Couldn’t have just disappeared. That, he had read outside the classroom, was impossible. Once information is assembled, it can’t be destroyed. It has matter, it has mass. And energy. Dead, he decided back then, was a supremely stupid word. Who would think of such a stupid thing? Like all the other words on the ever-growing list, it explained nothing. It was an empty term—a drug, used to try to pacify him, and give those who used it on him a power over him that they did not deserve. Well, we don’t really know where all her thoughts and memories went. Those structures just disappeared. Like information swallowed into a black

hole. But she's dead, all right. Dead as dead can be. Not satisfactory? Have you tried the word spirit? How about Heaven? Those are a couple of oldies but goodies.

Dead. *Morto*. It had rightfully earned its placement atop the list, duly and angrily noted with those roaring winds and damn lightning bolts.

Chris put his right foot on the pedal and prepared to ride away. But then he heard it again: the steady *clomp clomp clomp*—horseshoes on asphalt, still trotting toward him along Pine Street. Chris squinted into the dusk and caught the movement of something ghostly white, like a wisp of fog condensing in the folds of the boiling darkness. Chris shut his eyes tightly, sparking the flash, then opened them again to the rumbling thunder. But just like the night the Monster appeared, he could not alter this dreadful reality, and the mare trotted closer and closer. There was little doubt now, they had slipped through and—even worse—were becoming permanent without his cooperation, hiding permanently in the folds, and refusing to evaporate. His heart thumped wildly, up into his throat, but he would not give in to his fear as he continued to stare. He felt curious and brave enough to allow them closer, determined enough to face them, and maybe shout some anger, to try and scare them away. He saw the mare's round and pupil-less cue-ball eyes, its awful human grin. A furry little beast with the cat-like ears and a flattened nose and a fedora rode atop the horse, clutching the long and wild mane. And then came the laughter—like an old man's laughter, low and steady, but delighted by his fear. It trailed off as all went silent, then burst back louder, even more delighted and menacing. Chris knew where these nightmarish creatures ultimately came from, the awful things they could do, just as he and Janey knew how to combat them. *Janey!* Time to leave them in the darkness, and prepare.

Chris streaked past the lighted shops along the highway, then pedaled furiously through the spotlit entrance of the Lone Oak complex, listening to his tire treads rumble over the warm asphalt, certain that the mare was charging, closing the gap, and laughing all the way. He dared not look back until, out of breath, he turned into his driveway and leaped from the bike, running it into the safety of the dark but open box-filled garage, where he let the bike crash against those boxes as he spun around. But there was no sign down the lamplit street of the mare or its freakish rider, and no clomping hooves, just an occasional passing automobile with headlights on, and the sound of the tumbled bike's spinning front tire. And a moth, just a moth, all by itself, fluttering around the streetlight. *Not real, fictitious. Make-believe. Breathe. Breathe.* But as he finally pushed the button and watched—with a saving light now on—the garage door sections rattle one by one down the track, Chris, thinking of the Story, had to wonder: *Why are they after us?*

Banished

The following Monday, Chris found the halls of Holy Cross a foreign world. Those who had shunned him before his great athletic feat now wanted him to know them by name. He never knew he had so many friends. Even his teachers looked at him in a new way—some with puzzlement, others with respect. Skinny, unknown freshman he was not (not the unknown part, anyway). As the first-team tailback and school-record holder, Chris was suddenly cherished as a rare commodity, just like the Book and the Orb. He had done something that no sports heroes—their photos enshrined in the lobby’s glass trophy cases—had accomplished. And the second-best time wasn’t even close, not in the nanosecond world. A miracle, it truly was. Now a blurb about his accomplishment, printed on an index card, rested next to Coach Joe’s stopwatch, also encased. Word was planned for the school newspaper and the alumni newsletter. Toward the end of the school day, even Chris was convinced once more of his greatness (*that roller coaster ride is always wild*). And he indeed walked the halls like a man—make that a giant!—among boys, his skin tingling with a new kind of power: pride. Football was actually tolerable. Once again, his thoughts returned to the conundrum: Could he really be—willingly—an important part of this condemned team?

Victor’s reaction to the news wasn’t surprising. There was no congratulatory offering, just a dark reminder: “Don’t screw up.”

There was always that chance, since Chris really didn’t care. And Woz reminded Chris of this possibility later that Monday evening on the practice field. “We didn’t see you in the weight room yesterday, kid. Where were you?”

“I had lots of homework, coach,” Chris said, though it was a lie. He didn’t want to face Fitz and the Horde any sooner than he had to.

“Members of the first team are leaders,” Woz said. “You need to be a leader, kid.”

In the huddle, Chris didn’t hear any signs of the threats voiced the previous Friday. Fitz called the plays that Woz prescribed. Often, they involved Chris. And with each run, Chris felt increasingly confident that

Fitz's plan would not materialize—at least, not under the watchful eye of Coach Joe.

But then Chris started seeing the conspiracy develop. On a left end sweep, Koch “missed” his blocking assignment. That gave Dirty Dahlberg a clear shot at Chris. Chris cut inside, but Dahlberg struck low and hard with a shoulder tackle on Chris' left thigh pad, knocking him to the ground. Each time Chris ran to the left, Dahlberg was waiting for him, unblocked. He struck low again and again like a sledgehammer on the left thigh pad.

From time to time, Woz and Coach Joe admonished Koch. But just as Fitz predicted, neither coach suspected anything. Dahlberg was a talented player. And Koch often had trouble blocking him. Chris was surprised that Dahlberg, who answered to no one, had joined forces with the Horde. Yes, there would be consequences.



All week long, the trend continued. Dahlberg seemed to be everywhere, shadowing Chris even when he didn't get the ball.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Chris said one time after running a safety valve pattern into the left flat.

Dahlberg, all over Chris, in his face, just kept on grinning.

Finally, on Friday, it happened—but not from one of Dahlberg's sledgehammer blows. Rather, it came unexpectedly—while running sprints at the beginning of practice. Woz blew his whistle and Chris sprung out of his set position. His left quad tightened into a burning knot. Chris screamed in pain and clutched his leg as he hobbled about.

Woz approached slowly. “What's the matter, kid?”

“My leg, sir,” Chris said as he tried to walk normally. But his thigh muscle tightened and burned even more, and soon Chris had to sit on the ground.

Coach Joe rushed in. “Charlie horse,” he said to Woz. “He'll be all right.”

Coach Joe helped Chris to his feet, then guided him to the bench where he handed Chris a paper cup filled with water. Chris chugged the contents, and then saw Wenzel take his place in the backfield.

“Dahlberg,” Coach Joe said. “They put him up to this.”



All through practice, Chris tried to walk off his thigh cramp. But each time Chris tried to run, the muscle seized into that hot and painful knot. Woz grew concerned. The Mount Carmel game was Sunday, and his starting tailback was hobbled. He sent Chris to the training room where a large bruise on Chris' thigh revealed itself. The trainer wrapped an icy compress around Chris' leg, which was then elevated for a time. After

practice ended, Woz entered the training room and was informed of the injury.

“Fine time for a stunt like this,” Woz said. “Go home and get some rest, kid. We’re walking through the game plan in the morning, if you care to join us.”

“He’ll be there,” Coach Joe said.



Coach Joe gave Chris a ride home in his old, black pickup truck that smelled of hot vinyl. They tossed Chris’ bike in the open bed. Chris gave him the directions.

“I’m sorry, Chris, I should have seen this coming,” Coach Joe said. He shifted the gears as they headed down Pine Street. “Fitz can be a real devil when he wants something. But that’s why he’s our quarterback. Gotta have guys like that steering the ship.”

Chris sat in silence with the backpack in his lap, his left hand slowly rubbing the injured thigh muscle. He cringed to hear Coach Joe sanctioning that insanity.

“What I can’t understand is why he hates you so much. That’s not too strong of a word, hate, is it? Yeah, sure we all know he wants Weasel to be the starter. But Fitz’s an athlete. He knows you’re the better runner. But instead, he’s trying to get you killed. I don’t get it.”

“He’s never liked me. Not even in middle school.”

“You two were classmates.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you have a fight or something?”

“No.”

“So what happened?”

“I got promoted.”

“Promoted?”

“Yeah, to the ‘Hot Shots.’” Chris substituted an “o” for the “i,” just to be safe.

“‘Hot Shots,’ huh?” Coach Joe said before he laughed. “Were you in a gang?”

“Sort of. My school divided the eighth-grade class into two groups—smart kids in one, average kids in the other. Fitz and I started out in the average group.”

“But you got bumped up.”

“Yeah.”

“Makes sense. You’re a smart kid. I saw that from the first day. You got the ability to see everyone on the field all at once. And you know how to react. Don’t see that too often. Quite a talent. Being fast as Hell doesn’t hurt, either, huh?”

They reached the highway. Coach Joe downshifted, rolled slowly through the stop sign as he looked left, then turned right and accelerated. “So this war between you and Fitz, it all has to do with jealousy?”

“I guess.”

Coach Joe shook his head as he stomped on the clutch. “That’s our quarterback.” When the truck settled into third gear, Coach Joe said, “I gotta do something about this. Maybe have a little talk with Dahlberg, too. We’ll get Fitz to call off the dogs.”

After a few miles, Coach Joe turned right into the Lone Oak development. A fountain and a sign with cursive writing chiseled in stone welcomed them. The coach followed the meandering street. “Lone Oak, huh?” Coach Joe said, examining the proliferation of tightly packed two-story brick homes on grassy lots. “So they left one standing?”

“Not in my yard,” Chris said.

They arrived at Chris’ house. The garage door was up, and Chris saw his father’s BMW parked between the stacked cartons. Coach Joe parked in the street, then helped Chris remove the bike from the open back.

“Remember to keep icing that leg,” Coach Joe said. “And another thing—don’t give up. I know what you’re going through, son. I was a skinny kid my first year in high school—yeah, me, can you believe it? That’s a whole other story. Funny how things can change so quickly.” He grabbed two handfuls of his belly that stretched his black T-shirt and laughed, only briefly. “But that’s my point. I got pounded every time I got the ball. It was tough. I wanted to walk away lots of times. But my old man kept after me. He always told me: ‘Wake up, son, you can’t run away from your troubles.’ Simple lesson, I know, and I’m sure you’ve heard it before. But it’s true, and it bears repeating. You’re gonna run into a lot more Tom Fitzgeralds in your life. Sometimes, you gotta fight back.” His expression grew muted. “And those others...stay away from them. They might be worse. Making fun of you and the things that, way down inside, you know you really want. Always criticizing, tearing things down, groping for your sad company...telling you that you don’t look the part, and can’t make it. It’s so easy and safe not to try anymore, to save yourself from the pain of failing, and having to try again. You can always blame others for your misery, how they plot against you. The rest of your life, if you want. That’s safe and easy, too. Real easy.” Coach Joe came of his mini-trance slightly flushed. He smiled, then laughed a sad little laugh before his forceful words exploded the pity-portrait. “Just make sure you don’t quit.”

“I won’t,” Chris said as he stood next to his bike. *I can’t.*

“Buon-*issimo.*” Then Coach Joe hesitated. “You gotta understand something. The coach is under a lot of pressure about this tailback

position. He'll be challenging you every chance he gets. If you crack, you'll lose out, got that?"

"Yeah, but I'm hurt. What am I supposed to do?"

"I know. It'll heal. He knows. So don't get discouraged if he starts doubting you. Make sure he understands you want to play—no matter what he says. Keep reminding him of that. Your talent will win out. Always does. So rest up, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thanks, coach."

Coach Joe got into his truck and finally started the misfiring engine.

"Hey, Coach?" Chris said.

Coach Joe poked his head out the window. "Yeah, Chris?"

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you..."

"Sure, son, whatever it is."

"That language you speak—you know, your Italian."

Coach Joe's round face brightened as he smiled. "Ah, *si*—the food, the ladies—and the food! Magnifi-*cato!*"

"Yeah, well, you know, your translation...it's kinda...kinda..." He paused, fearing miscommunication.

"Yeah?" the coach said, still looking cheerful.

Chris decided to go right to the heart of the issue, as he saw it. "You really want to be Italian?"

Coach Joe looked on in bewilderment. "Doesn't everyone?" He laughed heartily—with his fat hand jutted out the window, and waving—as he drove off in a cloud of exhaust.

Clueless is he?

After Chris entered the house, Victor greeted the news of the injury in his usual way. "Are you sure about this?" he said as they sat opposite each other in the den.

"Do you want to see the bruise?" Chris said.

"I want you to start that game." Then he slammed his fist on the desk. "Damn it, Chris, when are you gonna man up?"

"I'm not faking it," Chris said.

"You've pulled this crap before," Victor said. "I don't believe you."

Chris shot from the chair, but came up limp. "There—happy now?" He turned and started out.

"You better not quit!"

Chris hobbled up the foyer stairs and entered his bedroom. He slammed the door behind him. Then he pounded his fist repeatedly on the mattress before lying prone on the bed, hot and vengeful thoughts filling his brain. He was sick to death of it all: Victor, Woz, football. Once again, he felt the urge to flee—to burst through his bedroom window like some fantasy hero, and hit the ground running, slashing sword in hand, seeking

vengeance. But there was nowhere to go and nothing he could do—not while he existed in this world, and had to depend on his father for survival.

Chris took some deep breaths, propped his head up on the pillows, then stared at another of his mother's paintings that covered a hole in the wall opposite his bed: The Artist's Studio, on loan from the rest of his mother's collection kept in the spare bedroom (her former studio) and managed by Janey. It depicted the snow-covered stucco Cottage that sat atop a bluff, with misty, purple-and-blue mountains in the backdrop. A solitary dwarf evergreen frosted in snow glowed unnaturally in the foreground. There was a low stone wall with an arched gateway that ran from the right side of the Cottage and surrounded a small courtyard. And in the back of this courtyard sat the lamp-lit glass-façade Studio, those French doors wide open, revealing the easel and small wooden stool. Oh, yes, she had planned her escape very well. Judging by the number of paintings that hung on the long back wall of that Studio, Chris saw that she intended to be very busy, happily painting more scenes in that new life, further distancing herself from them in this world—maybe into another, then another.

Chris rolled from his bed, then stuck his hand between the mattress and box spring to retrieve the Book. Sandra had given it to him one Christmas, under strict orders to keep it a secret, even from Janey. It was a strange book in its own right, even without the bestowed Power. For “the family,” a kind of fear-and-anger registry, containing anonymous entries over the centuries, written in Latin and then Bavarian and in all kinds of cursive styles, to summon the Legendary in the fight against those Turks and, later, the French. Sandra had hoped that Chris would use it “to collect happy thoughts,” and to save his soul from the same anger that ravaged Victor. But just like his ancestors, he had used it to record every rant against his invaders—even what he would and would not accept as good or truthful. And then there was the Story. She wasn't the only one who could build new worlds.

Little did she know what she truly had done.

How it would open the door to her World.

She'd know soon enough, when she became a permanent lie.

Chris flopped onto the bed, removed the time-worn ink-stained wooden dip pen fastened by a loop on the inside cover, then withdrew an ink bottle from the drawer and set it on the nightstand. He collected his thoughts for the day. He flipped to the back of the diary and, after dipping the pen into the well, added *football* to the list of stupid words, underlining it twice, the lightning bolts flashing from the steel nib. And then he found his latest entry and wrote another just below, condemning them all to *Åsgårdsreien*—every single one of them.



The next morning, while the rest of the team was slowly drifting onto the practice field, Chris decided to test his sore leg. He had survived the night with little pain as the continual icing and aspirin had done the job. And after he got dressed, descending the stairs was uneventful. Chris' hopes were high that his leg had healed enough to resume practice. But he didn't dare try to run until after Victor dropped him off at school.

After a lengthy session of stretching, which helped to postpone the inevitable, Chris stood at the goal line, then started running toward midfield. His leg seized up after a few strides. Limping back toward the end zone, he saw Woz and Coach Joe approaching.

"Ready to go, Chris?" Coach Joe said.

"I'm still having problems with the leg."

Woz looked more annoyed than usual. Then he flashed the same suspicious look Victor had given Chris the night before. "Okay—Wenzel," Woz called out, looking around, "where are you, kid?"

Wenzel charged up from a group slowly approaching the field. "Yes, sir?"

"You're first team until further notice."

"Yes, sir, coach. Thank you, sir."

Woz brushed past Chris as the Weasel broke the news to the Horde. They raised their helmets and cheered. And then: " 'When the Moon hits your eye like a big piece of pie...' " They laughed at him and poor Coach Joe.

Chris grew bitter at the sight of them, and resisted a calling. When they got older, had families and well-paying jobs, when they gathered at one of those highly anticipated reunions and reminisced, the Horde would cheer and sing once more for their fine accomplishment. After all, they had won. And that's really all that mattered to them.



After practice, Woz called Chris into his office. Chris sat in a steel chair opposite the coach's deep metal desk. Woz had the same severe look he had shown earlier. Chris felt as if he had just committed a heinous crime, and had been brought downtown to be interrogated in some harsh and sterile environment.

Woz put his hands behind his head and looked up at the suspended ceiling. "You know, there are lots of kids out there playing hurt. Sprained wrists, jammed fingers, cuts, bruises—"

"I didn't make this up, sir, if that's what you're thinking," Chris said.

Woz sat up in his chair and folded his hands on the desk. "What are you doing here, kid?"

Chris was confused. "You called me here, sir."

“You don’t want to be part of this team, I can tell. I’ve seen hundreds of kiddies like you come and go. You razzle-dazzle your way onto the roster—and then you give up, on to something else. You don’t put in the extra time. You weren’t here for summer camp. You don’t go to the weight room. And now you get hurt. I don’t need players like that. I can’t win with players like that. You just don’t fit in.”

“I didn’t give up—”

“Look, kid, I stuck my neck out for you. I told Przybyszewski you weren’t right for this team. I told him this would happen. But I gave in. School record—yeah, yeah, yeah. Great. Now look at the spot I’m in. Wenzel’s not ready for tomorrow. What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Woz rapped his knuckles on the desk. “You don’t want to be here, do you?”

Woz was pushing him hard, real hard, just as Coach Joe had warned. But Chris kept silent.

“Come on, kid, be honest. Do you like football, or do you want to be doing something else with your time? It’s okay, kid—really. You can tell me. I’m not going to bite your head off.”

Chris shrugged. “No, I’m fine with it.”

“Fine with it?”

“I don’t want to quit, sir, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Woz nodded slowly, sternly. “Okay, kid, I gave you your chance. I wanted to spare you the embarrassment. But now I’m gonna lay all the cards on the table. I got a call from a booster last night. Do you know what a booster is, kid? And I’m not talking about a shot or a chair.”

Chris was stunned. “Yeah?”

“I gotta tell you, kid, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’ve seen and heard a lot of bad things, but I’ve never heard of a kid do anything like this. Do you know what I’m driving at?”

Chris remained silent. The hot blood rushed to his head, which began to pound in pain.

“A church? You vandalized a church? The House of God?”

“Well...I was there—”

“You were there? Christ Almighty, kid, what in Hell were you thinking? And now you expect me to keep you on a team that represents the Lord Himself? Do you know what kind of a fool you made me out to be? Wenzel’s dad is a big contributor to this school. It was going to take somebody pretty extraordinary to push his kid out of the starting spot. Coach Joe convinced me I had my man—and it turns out, you’re just a hoodlum. I’m a forgiving man—but this?” He shook his head. “The word’s getting around now, kid. Not only am I getting calls to kick your butt off this team, the

principal's getting calls to have me strung from a tree. And I'm not about to lose my job because of some degenerate like you." He leaned closer and folded his hands on the desk. "Let me ask you another thing. Aren't you afraid you're gonna burn in Hell for this? I mean, really—a church? I can't get over it. I've never heard of anything so goddamn irreverent."

The shame and the guilt Chris felt during the tirade quickly changed to anger. Everyone was so quick to pass judgment, yet no one knew all the facts. Guilt by association. His punishment, no doubt, would be eternal. Now he understood Fitz's threat, Dahlberg's attacks being just a sideshow, to keep Chris distracted from the painfully obvious and deadly main event. Chris had been all wrong about his nemesis. Fitz thought in ways that were foreign to Chris, a way that only the most cunning adult could understand. He never saw this coming. But he should have. It was much too easy, for Fitz. And bad stuff always happened even when just a bit of the horrible truth leaked out. He was tempted to disappear—and take them all with him. But he knew it wouldn't last, not before the Holy Season.

"Let's end this little charade so you don't waste any more of my time, or yours," Woz said. "Turn in your playbook before you go."

Shock seized Chris as he continued to stare at the coach's stern, unyielding expression. His flesh quickly blackened and shriveled, revealing patches of his tarnished skull. But those glaring eyes remained in place. Chris was so stunned at the dramatic turn, he felt as if he had just been shot, his anger evaporating. But he could not maintain eye contact for long, now that the coach knew. Chris looked down. The will to say anything more just wasn't there, not even with those incessantly nagging words hammering his brain—*you can't! you can't! you can't!*—or visions of the Monster Victor, towering over him with its chain, ready to capture him. Chris was never good at fighting for something he did not want or believe in. And a seductive relief immediately sprang up as it always did after a sudden failure, briefly clearing his mind of the horror. No more practice, no more charade, and Tom Fitzgerald. And he wouldn't have to perform, and fail, after all the hype, in an actual game. It's not like he quit. Forced to do it. Out of his hands. Chris could even blame Victor's betrayal, if he dared. So why did he feel like throwing up? Fitz had used the Church Incident, for which Chris was culpable. Couldn't hide Fitz' maneuver from Victor. He probably already knew, the phone call received, and would be waiting. So much for the relief. But there was no fight left in him.

Chris returned to his locker, grabbed his playbook, then set it on Wozniak's desk. The coach, at a grease board, contemplating Xs and Os, didn't turn to acknowledge him.

Once outside, Chris walked in a daze toward the bike racks—and saw his father's idling import parked on Pine Street by the parking lot entrance, the

woolly black figure within growing and bursting through its silk suit, its horns curling out through the windows like black snakes. Like everyone else in the universe, Victor had received the call. The school complex, the houses, the trees—everything was falling into that swirling black hole, light flashing all around its event horizon.

“Chris!” Coach Joe shouted from behind. “Christopher Russo, wait up, son.”

Sickened, Chris turned to face Coach Joe. He saw the panic in the coach’s eyes. Even he seemed to be rotting.

“I just talked with the coach,” he said. “What in Hell happened?”

“He kicked me off the team. He doesn’t want me around. None of them do.” He knew the sound of self-pity. But he couldn’t stop himself.

Coach Joe grabbed Chris by the shoulders. “Why did you give him your playbook? Why? You promised me you wouldn’t give up.”

Feeling ashamed, Chris looked down and said nothing.

“Damn it, Chris, it was just a test—don’t you see? He’s always playing games with you kids. All you had to say was ‘no.’ Why didn’t you say ‘no,’ Chris? Why didn’t you fight him?”

“I did something this past year,” Chris said, “something I shouldn’t have. And now I’m paying for it. You’ll hear all about it, I’m sure. I’m sorry. I know I let you down. Thanks for all you’ve done.”

“So that’s it? Just like that? After what we talked about?”

Chris struggled to look at Coach Joe, who was fraught with confusion. This was how it always worked. Coach Joe knew that. “I don’t want to fight. I’m tired of fighting. The coach is right. I just want to go home. Just go somewhere...”

“But Chris—”

“I’m sorry. Really. But I don’t want this. He does.”

“He?” Coach Joe froze for a moment, then the fight seemed to leave him, too, and he nodded. “Okay, Chris,” he said as he let go. “Okay. I’m...I’m sorry, too.” He sighed and shook his head once more.

“Yeah, no doubt.” Chris turned to face his father’s harsh gaze. He saw in an instant that the Monster—with the terrible chain twirling—was ready to carry him away from Janey all the way to the flaming halls of Pandæmonium. He didn’t know how he could resist.

PART TWO



The Holy Season of Magic

Resurrecting the Tree

“One step at a time, Chris,” Janey said as they struggled up the basement stairs with the artificial Christmas tree. “Don’t go too fast! This isn’t a football game.”

“Don’t ever say that word to me again—ever,” Chris said. “It’s on the list!”

“What word?”

“You know which one.”

“What list?”

“Don’t give me that.”

Janey was a few steps from the foyer. She guided the top of the tree while, farther down the stairs, Chris gripped the metal stand, still attached to the wooden pole that served as the trunk. Even though the tree was wrapped in a sheet to keep its artificial branches from straightening out, it barely fit in the stairwell. Bringing the tree from the basement was always a difficult task. Nearly all the weight was on Chris’ end. Being the big, strong ex-football player, he shouldn’t have needed his little sister’s help. But since he tried to carry as much of the load as possible, sparing Janey any agony, Chris puffed and sweated with every awkward step, as if he were back on the practice field. Even worse, he could still feel the pain in his thigh from Dahlberg’s sledgehammer blows, and his quaking leg felt as if it were about to buckle.

At least that nightmare was over. Since he was cut, Chris hadn’t seen any curling horns or rotting flesh, and no more clomping horses. *Very weird*. The shadows were benign, the clock radio unthinking. Even the blinking-flashing thing had disappeared, which disappointed him, in a way. It had been comforting, consistent, always there. It was as if the dark power—now with a small “d” and “p”—had retreated all the way back to Pandæmonium, the *White Rose* had completely closed, and the book—small “b”—was storing its energy, waiting patiently for the holy season of magic—small “h”, “s”, and “m”—and giving him the rest he would desperately need before everything exploded out of control.

Like last year.

Or not.

Maybe the book's controlling power was gone for good. He had to seriously consider that part. The evidence was overwhelming, and he couldn't deny the facts, which was why the book had returned to being just his diary, its original intent. Not banished to the top shelf of his closet or sealed in plastic wrap, to keep it from oozing, as he once considered. That would mean it was still a threat. More like retired, useless, like the legacy and the legends and the religion. Chris was proud that his scientific ways seemed to have won the battle. The book and its power had been creeping back into his life, threatening to control him. But in the end, truth overwhelmed the lies, as it always should. (*How ironic I have the horde to thank for that. And Victor. I HATE irony!*) And with every passing uneventful day, truth became the new power. It felt good to breathe so normally for so long. So now, the day of reckoning was almost upon them—the first Sunday after Thanksgiving, on God's day (Janey's insistence, to coincide with Advent, which he let slide), the official beginning of their holiday season, and the final test. He had no intention of interfering with the healing process. Still, tomorrow—at midnight—couldn't come fast enough. He couldn't wait to hear the tolling, so he could at last drive a final "truth" stake into the heart of the book, and kill the power completely.

During this odd but welcomed respite, the horde ignored him at school, which was just fine with Chris. He concentrated on his studies, which needed concentrating. His school record stood, but was hidden somewhere in their books. The stopwatch and the notecard had been quietly removed after hours. And he went about his academic days like the unknown that he once was—with the badge of "loser" pinned to his chest, silently scorned for having the talent but no will, and branded again across the forehead as a failure. Janey was disappointed in him, though she never said it. But he could tell by her long stretches of glum silence, like Sandra used to show when she realized that her escape plans would never be fulfilled. Chris felt it whenever he was around Janey, despite her faint smiles and his efforts to pack the guilt tightly with all the other failures in his life. And then there was his promise of their escape, still unstructured with no safe conclusion, but always on his mind, with Victor lurking. Janey never talked about it. Neither did he. Victor hadn't gone through with his threat to ship Chris off to some military school. That required even more money, and work. And there had been no violent eruption, no angry beating. This football failure was expected, preordained, in the cards, as always, so no real surprise there, after all, not even to his father. But Victor had nonetheless tightened his grip on Chris—early to bed, and lights out—and the house became even more of a prison. At least Chris reacquainted himself with some of his favorite fantasy novels, read in appropriate candlelight. Their strange worlds had

never been so comforting. But on the down side, the telescope became off limits, and Victor had unknowingly cut the one weak link Chris had with the ever-elusive Katie. Their breakup anniversary was coming, too. No telling how he'd react to that.

Suddenly, the tree refused to move. Chris nearly lost his footing. "Janey?" He had reason for concern. She hadn't been whistling much these past few weeks. And Thanksgiving had been a total bust, again. But today, given what it represented in their lives, Janey seemed to have much more energy. At least her take-charge attitude had returned. There was no way she was going to skip out on this highly sacred and much anticipated ritual. Not only was it the beginning of The Holy Season of Magic, it was the start of Janey's birthday month. Since she was born on Christmas, holiday gifts often doubled as birthday gifts. Feeling "gypped," she quickly remedied the problem, allowing the flow of presents and special favors for an unreasonably-extended time.

"I'm fine, thank you," Janey said at last.

"So what's going on in that girl-brain of yours? Why are we stopping?"

"You sound like you're having a heart attack."

"Well, it is a little heavy."

"Do you want to stop and rest?"

It came out of nowhere: *In the suffocating tunnel that leads to Pandæmonium?* Chris heard a distant boom echoing up behind him. He turned and looked down the darkened staircase.

Nothing.

Out of habit, Chris closed his eyes briefly to reset everything on a black canvas. "Just keep going," he said finally. "Get us into the foyer." Chris pushed the tree up the remaining steps and through the doorway. In the foyer's level openness, he caught his breath. All was calm, now. The tree felt much lighter and easier to handle.

With both hands clutching the sheet, Janey grunted as she walked backward, guiding the top of the tree down the one step into the living room. The grandfather clock struck five. The evening light was growing dim.

Chris followed her lead across the hardwood floor. "Now let's stop and rest," Chris said. "You're the one who looks like she's having a heart attack."

"That's not necessary," she said. "Keep moving, please."

Raising the tree the weekend after Thanksgiving became an act of defiance their first holiday season without Sandra. The sooner the tree came out, the better, Chris had decided after that turkey-less day. Victor hadn't helped with the decorating. He never did, not even when Sandra was alive, which, as it turned out, was to their distinct advantage, and his great financial loss. Infusing the holiday spirit into their home had been Sandra's

great passion. So last year, Victor, having left the house for a while, was surprised upon his return to see the tree decorated without her presence or his consent—and that there would nonetheless be light and joy once again in his chambers of doom. Victor was so shocked, in fact, that he seemed afraid and powerless to stop it. Chris duly noted Victor's reaction, and he and Janey incorporated that fact into the story, which they still kept a secret, only to be retold when they needed power and revenge. So Christmas, which Chris had angrily considered banishing with all his other old and tired religious beliefs and icons, remained his favorite time of the year. It was a time when the laws of physics were temporarily relaxed, allowing the magic of his sister's world to coexist, side by side, with the numbers and formulas and scientific theories that now governed his. But in their house, even the power of Christmas had its limits. Appropriately, on Epiphany, when the Twelve Days were officially over, the magical world departed and order and reality were restored as the tree was dismantled, wrapped in its shroud, and buried in its basement tomb. Victor, of course, insisted on this.

Before his transformation was completed, Chris and Janey had been holy compatriots. He was a fearless and mighty warrior, never defeated, always respected. And she was an angel, having selflessly given up her human life—if only temporary, until their task was complete—to acquire indestructible heavenly powers. They could leave the protection of the Village, created by the benevolent Sorceress artist, and plant the Sacred Trees all the way to the entrance of the Terrible Shrieking Mountain's Chamber of Darkness that contained Pandæmonium. This brave act secured, using God's pure light, the Boiling Evil within—and guaranteed the safe arrival of the Child Savior born on Christmas Day (Janey's "B-Day"). (*Because monsters should never be allowed to harm a child, not ever.*) But today, as they carried the artificial tree into the living room, Chris (now the nonviolent man of reason) and Janey (still the keeper of the sacred orb) became the two fearless allies, braving the perils of the kingdom of darkness to plant their apparatus that, when activated, would push all ignorance and lies away with the light of wisdom and truth. The grand decree, written in his well-hidden book of everything, stated implicitly that only the chosen could exist within the village for as long as the great tree stood lit. Their story, as he now saw it, and rewrote it in these tranquil times (unauthorized).

They stood the tree before the bay window. The room felt cold, with the thermostat set at its permanent winter setting of sixty-five degrees. But Janey—in her traditional worn jeans and pink sweater, her wide eyes sparkling, and her smile gleaming—didn't seem to mind. So neither did he. Chris stepped back from the tree to see if it was centered. After adjusting its position, he stood back once more. Then, satisfied, he began removing the safety pins that held the musty old sheet in place. With the

sheet gone, the tree stood like a shriveled relic, its artificial branches matted and bent.

“*Ish-ka-bibble*,” Janey said. “It looks sad.”

“It looks dead,” Chris said. “Let’s bring this thing back to life before he comes home.”

Chris and Janey worked together in silence, each familiar with their tasks. Janey worked on the lower half of the tree while Chris worked the upper half, straightening the branches and brushing the matted needles open. After a while, the job was done, and they stepped back to admire the refurbished tree. It stood tall, but remained dark and slumbering.

Chris crawled under the tree and plugged in the dangling end of the string lights into the wall socket. Then he rushed to the wall switch by the foyer entrance. “Ready?”

Janey nodded. She, too, believed in their story of the tree’s magic. So she also knew the dire consequences to their perception of safety should the tree remain unlit.

Chris flicked the switch. The tree’s clear bulbs lit up like a thousand tiny stars and filled the room with the saving light.

“Yay!” Janey said as she clapped.

Chris was relieved. The magical glow, their safe haven, was back for another season. But the tree’s full power was not yet restored. Other magical elements were needed. “Okay,” he said to Janey, “let’s go get ’em.”

Janey rushed past him and back down the stairs.

“Hey, slow down.” Chris walked quickly to the basement doorway and stopped briefly to gaze down the darkened stairway once more. Some years earlier, before the dark power invaded, this view brought on a creeping fear of dangerous things hiding in the dark, and eventually became the black heart of the chambers of doom. Now he smirked defiantly at the childish notion—forced himself to—then quickly followed Janey into the box-cluttered mess that was their storeroom (or, as she called it, the “icky room”), no longer barricaded. Chris wanted to make sure that Janey didn’t go snooping around, and find things she wasn’t supposed to see. Victor kept his outmoded rep samples here and throughout the basement (the newer stuff was jammed into the garage)—mostly sprockets, small generators, and those dreaded roller chains—and he never seemed to find the time to discard them. Illuminated by a solitary bulb with a pull cord, this room, Chris liked to joke, was more like a snapshot of Victor’s brain, and offered great insight into how it worked. The brittle boxes of ornaments—some marked Friedrich (the great deniers), others marked Russo (the great liars)—were stacked near the idle furnace. Janey was already standing beside them. “Doesn’t this room give you the creeps?” he said.

“No,” Janey said. She began to sort the boxes into separate, smaller piles.

“It does to me. Always has. Never know what might be hiding in here.”

“Just spiders,” she said.

“Yeah, sure...’piders. Big, black hairy ones—you know, the kind that sneak into your mouth at night when you’re snoring—”

“I don’t snore!”

“—and crunch when you step on them. You know how much you like crunchy spiders. I think they might even have bones. And then there are the ghosts—and the winged demons.”

She picked up a box. “There’re no ghosts down here—Victor.”

“Really? Well, now, there’s a change of heart. I thought you believed in them.”

“I do. But this house just isn’t old enough.”

“Oh, is that the rule?”

“Uh-huh!” she said before smiling.

“Well, if I were you, I’d stay clear of this room. I know I do.”

“Something in here you don’t want me to see?”

Chris placed his hands on his hips. “There’s a lot of Victor’s junk in here, Janey. I don’t want it falling on you. If that should happen and I’m not around, you could be in big trouble.”

“Okay, fine,” she said, much too willingly. She held out the box. “Here, you take these. And—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Chris said, grabbing the box, “ ‘be careful.’ Good thing you’re here.”

“Glad you admitted it.”

“Are you sure you can do this?”

Janey seized another ornament box. “I thought you wanted to finish before he got home?” She pushed past him. “Will you please move those cans?”

“Excuse me?” Chris glanced at Victor’s collection of half-empty paint cans and thinner at the base of the wall near the furnace. “I’ll do it when we clean up.”

“You said that last year.”

“I won’t forget.”

“You said that last year, too. Do it today, as a present for me.”

“Whatever.” Chris glanced around, looking for signs...then quickly followed her up the stairs.



When all the boxes had been carefully retrieved, Chris spread them around the tree according to heritage—Russo on the left and Friedrich on the right (*Friedrichs are always right, Janey says*). Then he removed the box tops,

revealing ornaments of different shapes and colors: stars, grapes, eggs, pears, teardrops, pine cones, and smooth orbs. Russo ornaments, most of which were red, were made of brittle glass. Some did not survive the journey. Friedrich ornaments were mostly blue. But some were made of thick glass with brass caps. And their silver linings made them reflective and shiny. “Kugels,” Sandra had called them. They were all that remained from a rare collection handed down through the generations on his mother’s side. “From Austria,” she had said to them years ago when they first helped her decorate the tree, “where St. Nicholas came from.” And the gilded book. And on that fateful day, she told a wildly foreign and amazing Christmas tale full of enchantment and foreboding, with odd names and scary creatures they had never heard of. Chris and Janey had, at the time, believed every word. And after extensive research, taking special note of all the associated famous artwork, ghoulish and frightening as they were, Chris wrote the story down in the diary. Soon the tale became part of the greater fantasy that he and Janey composed to deal with their fear and unhappiness. But after death not only came knocking but made itself right at home, after delving extensively into this tale and her heritage, Chris finally dismissed it all as a concoction based on pre-Christian Alpine folklore—a parent’s clever attempt to educate her children on the origins of Christmas traditions while also trying to scare them into living good lives. And he had, accordingly, and without Janey’s knowledge, altered the official version to suit his newly enlightened views and findings, and defiantly right the wrongs because he just had to, despite his pledge not to tamper with a single word without her input or approval. But then, the creatures started appearing, and he had to reconsider things once again and become more accepting, before they finally retreated with the dark power into the book. But this, he kept quiet, lest he seem unsure of himself, his beliefs, and his ability to accomplish things. Janey was still convinced that the spirits of the people and things in Sandra’s story lived within the kugels. It was an interesting observation, Chris noted. He could see it. And he often wondered about the ancient faces and strange celebrations that, over time, had reflected off their shiny surfaces.

It was time to resurrect the tree to its full glory—kugels first. Per their ritual, Janey worked the bottom half, cradling each ornament in her hands as if it were a tiny bird, fallen from the nest. Then she carefully hung them on the branches. How ironic that these treasures hung in full view of a man so desperate for money, but who still, because of his disdain for the holidays, knew nothing of their value. Just as Janey liked to remind Chris often: *What better place to hide it than right under his nose? You know how men are!*

“Make sure you put them farther inside the tree,” Janey said. “Not on the ends. I don’t want you knocking them off.”

“I know, Janey,” Chris said.

“And don’t crowd them all in one spot.”

Chris stepped back to check their work. Apparently, they had different definitions of crowded. The “perfect” placement of her ornaments was inconsistent, leaving forbidden gaps in the tree. But he didn’t dare move them, or even utter a critical word.

Slowly, the boxes emptied. At times, when Chris spied upon Janey, so intent on fulfilling the ritual, and so content, she appeared to be that small but determined angel of their story, wings and all. Once all the kugels were on the tree, they hung the rest of the blue Friedrich ornaments. Then they reluctantly dispersed the Russo ornaments. (Janey often objected to their use, as she considered them “evil.” If it were up to her, the brittle red ornaments would not be hung at all. But since they were, they were often placed on the branch tips. Chris suspected that she would purposely dislodge them from the tree, and he even caught her removing them on occasion.) From time to time, they came across a cracked or shattered kugel. They treated each broken orb as a family tragedy, knowing that the supply was finite, and that once an ornament broke, so did a memory. Remnants could not be tossed into the trash. They were carefully picked up one by one and placed in a coffee can with the remains of past tragedies.

By the time the grandfather clock struck six, it was dark outside. But they had nearly finished decorating the tree, which was now all aglow and twinkling. All that remained was the placement of the treetop ornament, and a few other special accessories.

The topper was, by far, the most mysterious of all the decorations. Adorned with gold leaf, the ornament looked like a tower lopped off a Byzantine cathedral—a hollowed-out onion dome crowned with a twisting spire. Its history had long been lost with the passing of time. But it was silently revered, as if one day they would discover its importance. Chris had to stand on the bay window ledge so he could secure the topper on the tree’s crown.

Special accessories added to the holiday magic. One was a snow globe depicting a chapel scene, complete with an altar on which the tiny statue of an angel and a Bible rested. Then the ceramic Nativity scene and its tiny wooden manger with bits of real straw, also in their story—the Child’s ultimate destination—placed below the protective tree. And per that story, Janey appropriately set the ceramic figures of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus on the mantel just above the living room’s gas fireplace, well away from the tree. The figures would be returned to the Nativity scene at the stroke of midnight on Christmas, their traditional gift-giving time, after their storybook quest to save the Child from harm was officially completed.

But the most valuable accessory, by far, was the nineteenth century music box, made in Leipzig, that Sandra had given Janey on their last Christmas together. It was actually two boxes, the smaller inside the larger, which was—with its cracked wooden slats secured with rusty nails, and stenciled with the word “ornaments”—purposely made to look common so as not to draw attention to the gilded one within (*Janey’s “phone booth,” where she changes.*) When its lid opened, its chimes activated. Inside that box, encased in the red velvet liner, was the carved statue of an angel with a tiny white snowflake on her chest. Her arms were extended forward, and her hands were cupped to hold the small purple orb, no larger than a marble, also encased within. It was the orb that was the real treasure—a rare amethyst kugel (“purple” to me—I’m a guy). Sandra had kept it a secret from Victor, whom she feared would pawn it. (“You’re its guardian now,” she had told Janey.) In their story, it was the true source of the tree’s power. Noticeably missing was the comparably valuable *Windrädchen*. Victor confiscated it last year after they left its candles burning, and, with its black riders, became his terrible war machine, entombed in the mountain. Chris doubted his father’s concerns about a devastating fire—he would love it!—and only confirmed his fears about the purple kugel.

“Here,” Chris said to Janey as he lifted the music box from the crate, “you hide it.”

But just as she did last year, Janey placed the music box at the foot of the tree with the manger scene. Janey opened the outer box, removed the inner one, then closed the outer box lid before resting the smaller box atop it. Then she repeatedly turned a small brass crank, which wound the inner spring. When she opened that lid, the chimes activated. Janey set the angel in its stand and began whistling the song. Finally, she placed the kugel in the angel’s hands. “I’ll have to make up some words for it some day, so I can sing it to you.”

“That’s okay. I like it the way it is.”

“But it’s me—and it’s my song. I want to sing it to you. It’s my signal—in case I get in trouble.”

“Changing the story, are you?” Chris felt glad, less guilty.

“Don’t you want to sing it to me so I know you’re on your way?”

Now Chris had to sigh. “Look, he’s gonna open that thing one of these days.”

“So? Even if he does, he won’t know what he’s seeing. Just like the kugels. But don’t you worry, he won’t come near it. He can’t.”

“I’m not sure he knows the rules.”

“Yes, he does. He may not think it, but he knows.”

He sure will. Chris and Janey stepped back one last time. Now the tree looked as big and proud as a mountain. They were ready for him.

“What about the candle bags?” Janey said. It was a tradition born at St. Boniface, which encouraged the parishioners to bring a candle bag to the outdoor shrine adjacent to the church, in remembrance of a lost loved one. Janey used them to line their driveway, not in the story.

“Let’s wait till after he comes home. He might try to run them over.”



It wasn’t long before Chris heard the hum of the electric garage door opener. He hid the music box in its unassuming container. Then he stood next to Janey before the tree, hand on her shoulder, as they faced the darkened foyer.

With bowling ball bag in one hand and a fast-food cup with lid and straw in the other, Victor squeezed through the doorway beneath the staircase. He had been drinking. Victor didn’t like soda pop. He used the cup so he could openly drink while driving. Victor paused as he stared at them. The light from the tree illuminated his stern face. He seemed irritated at the entire defiant scene, which was not unexpected. It didn’t take long for the curling horns to appear. “At it again, I see.” He quickly turned away, set his bowling bag on the floor and the cup on the small table next to the door. Then he removed his leather jacket and hung it in the closet. Victor approached the living room but stopped just short of the step. He gazed around with the same bewilderment he showed last year. “Make sure you put all those boxes away. And put a timer on that damn thing. I don’t want it shining all night.”

“Of course not,” Chris said.

“What was that?” Victor said.

“We will,” Janey said.

Chris looked at her and raised his left eyebrow. Her lying, it seemed, knew no bounds.

Victor retrieved his fast-food cup and headed for his study. The keys jingled, the handle turned, the door slammed.

Chris watched Janey as she stared intently into the foyer. Her smile slowly spread. He smiled, too. The tree had passed its first major test.

“It was the light,” Janey said. “You know what it stands for.”

“Logic,” Chris said.

“Faith.”

“Proof.”

“Belief.”

“Not in my village,” Chris said.

“It’s not yours. She created it.”

“She only lives there. I let her in my story.”

“Our story!”

Chris saw that her face was growing hard, that she was digging in. “C’mon, Janey, let’s not ruin things. No lectures from me, no sermons from you. Let’s just let the story do its thing.”

“Well? It’s just a thought,” she said, turning down her emotions. “You should keep it in mind. I am the Way and the Truth and the—”

“Yeah-yeah, I remember how it goes.” How could he not? Wisely focusing on the visual, Janey had placed a cross from his mother’s casket and a Europeanized portrait of Christ the Savior in Chris’ bedroom shortly after the assault.

Janey gazed at the glowing tree. “Good, you should. It’s what this holiday is really all about.”

“The Light?” Chris said. She had trapped herself in another famous Janey-ism. “It’s not the Light, it’s the Life.”

“And the birth of it.” She faced him, stuck out her tongue, then smiled.

“You never can admit when you’re wrong, can you?”

“I got you to think about it, didn’t I? That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s finish cleaning up. You get the vacuum—as I know you’re just itching to do—and I’ll get the heck out of your way. Then we need to work on your letter to Saint Nicholas.” Sandra had instilled that tradition, too. (*No Santa Claus allowed, even though they really are the same person—just ask the Dutch.*) Last year at this same time, because she had access to a car, Katie had helped him fulfill that list. Chris wondered if she would appear at his door this year. He could call her, of course, but he feared the response. Fear often kept him from action.

“I’ve already finished the list, thank you,” Janey said.

“Naturally. Can I see it?”

“What for?”

“Maybe I want to add something.”

“You do not.” She looked past him as something caught her attention. Sadness swept over her face.

Frowning, Chris turned and looked out the darkened window. He did see something—some *things*—fluttering down.

“The angels...they’re crying,” Janey said. She ran into the foyer.

“Angels? What, again? No—Janey, wait!”

Janey was already outside by the time he reached the doorway. Standing in the middle of the slushy lawn, illuminated by the tree’s light, Janey spun ’round and ’round with her arms extended from her sides. “Look, I’m the music box angel.”

“Yeah? Where’s your purple kugel, oh keeper of the sacred orb?”

“Oopsie, must have lost it. And it’s not purple, it’s amethyst.”

“Not in my story.”

“*Our story.*” Janey tipped her head back and caught on her tongue one of the fat snowflakes that drifted down from the icy moonlit sky.

“I hate to remind you again, little girl,” Chris said, “but you have to die before you can be an angel. And if I remember all the old junk correctly, human spirits can’t become angels. Angels are created spirits. Never had bodies. Our story is breaking the rules.”

Janey kept twirling.

Her momentary silence told him she was listening, but not happy with his words. “Don’t get mad at me,” Chris said. “I didn’t write the rules. You’ll have to file a complaint with the home office.”

“See what you’re doing?” she said. Her darting tongue caught another flake. “They can’t stop crying.”

Chris folded his arms and leaned against the doorjamb. “Really. And why is that?”

“Because you won’t believe in them.”

“Of course, it’s my fault.”

“I *know.*”

“Sorry, I’m not giving in. You and your kind are frozen out of my world until further notice.”

“It’s not your world and, yes, you will be sorry.”

“Hey, you’ve got your realm and I’ve got mine. Coexistence. Side by side.” As he now saw it. He could sense that Janey was mistaking his confession for banter. She didn’t fully comprehend what he was telling her, how he had broken a promise, or the specifics of that betrayal, but that was okay. He was still the man of reason. And he had to stick to his principles, express his true feelings, and rewrite the wrongs. He was certain that she would understand and forgive him if, by chance, she discovered the changes. At least the angels were still there. But he didn’t see how that scene would happen, as long as she didn’t read his diary. That he could not allow.

“I’ll get you to change back, you’ll see.”

Chris shook his head, but smiled. It warmed his heart to see that she was feeling so well this special night. “You’re gonna get dizzy.”

“You should try this,” Janey said as she continued to spin.

“I don’t think so. You know how much I hate shoveling the stuff. If I had my way—”

“But the snowflakes are blessed. They will heal your soul, and help you see the light. When it is time, you *will* see the light. And I will be there for you.”

Again with “the light.” Just can’t admit it. “I see perfectly, thank you. In fact, I see someone who’s gonna fall down if she doesn’t stop.”

Janey ignored him and, though wobbly, kept on spinning.

“You know, I’d really be hearing it about now if I were the one out there without my coat and hat and mittens.”

“But you’re not,” she said before giggling.

And then she tumbled to the ground.

Janey lay motionless on her back, her eyes closed. He couldn’t see her breath.

“Janey?” Chris said. He pulled away from the doorjamb.

She did not respond.

“Janey!” He ran up to her.

Janey’s arms and legs began moving as if she were doing jumping jacks. “See, you believed me. My plan is starting to work.” And then it came, to remind him just how big of a dope he was: Janey’s head-tipped, full-throated, mouth-wide-open laugh that sounded more like the jovial Victor when he was really drunk. The laugh was so loud and obnoxious, it seemed to rattle the neighborhood. And then the best part: when all of oxygen in her lungs used to expel those laughs had been squeezed out, she drew in a long, high-pitched wheeze. She sounded so cartoonish, so unbefitting of her angelic image, the laugh made her all the more human and charming.

But there was no way he was going to let her know this—not now. “Not funny, Janey.”

“So guess who I am now?” The snow angel took shape.

“You...are...relentless!”

“It’s my job.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just about ready to fire you. Who do I see about that?”

“Sorry, can’t do it. We have the pact.” She stopped, sat up, then turned around to admire her work, the clumps of wet snow dropping one by one from the back of her sweater.

“Aren’t you ever gonna give me a break with this angel stuff? That would be the greatest Christmas present ever.”

“Not until you believe again and I save you.”

“It’s too late.”

“No, it’s not. It never is.”

“More divine laws from Heaven?”

“Uh-huh!”

Chris extended his right hand. “Enough.” Janey reached up and he pulled her from the slushy lawn. Then he brushed the snow from her clothes.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” She stared at their glorious tree shining in the bay window. “Look—isn’t it pretty?”

“It sure is.” Chris rested his left arm across her shoulders, and gave her a slight hug, which, because he rarely did it, felt weird but good. “Merry Christmas, Janey.”

She turned and slipped her arms around his waist, pulled herself close, and looked up at him with those great, round, Sandra-hazel eyes. “It will be the best ever. You’ll see.”

Tomorrow at midnight, Janey. That’s when we’ll know for sure.

The Wish List

Nov 28. Back to my favorite topic—that famous equation—because Janey talked about it yesterday. (Well, sort of. She wants me to “see the light”—har har, science humor!) The equation is so small and simple, but so powerful, it keeps bugging me. Everyone thinks it’s just for nerdy scientists to help them prove their whacko theories. But it’s not. It’s the key to the whole thing: matter is energy and energy is matter. Each can change into the other. Each IS the other. That’s all there is in the universe. Nothing more, nothing less. (This equation should have made the Holy Book. On second thought, I guess it did—by accident. What did they know back then?) So every “thing” in the universe is “frozen” energy, including me. It just has a different formula that arranges the stuff. (Chris = light x Sandra + Victor? Sorry, can’t do math.)

Light is energy. So it too can change into matter. Light is the fastest thing in the universe. Nothing can go faster, not even me (more humor!). But light can be slowed down. It can even be stopped and examined. Light is made of particles. It can carry information. Whoa! So if you freeze pure light, what does it look like? What gives energy matter and mass? I’m trying to picture this all the time, but it’s so hard to do.

***Footnote: In case anyone ever reads this junk (that means you, Janey), every time you see a word underlined, it means it’s a stupid word. And since I haven’t explained that before, this is what makes me mad about all those words: they’re just part of a cover-up, to make me shut up and run with the herd. But, hey, you can’t just say, “It’s light. Accept it and move on.” What in Hell does light mean? What about the particles? What are they made of? And what are the particles that make the particles made of? Can they become matter? How? The connections keep going deeper, down and down, smaller and smaller, faster and faster. Where does it end? Does it ever end? If I could make myself small enough to be in one of those particles, what would the night sky look like? (I would need a sky. After all, I’m human.)

What about the other way? What is the universe? Is it just a particle? Is it part of something? Up and up and up—bigger and bigger, slower and slower. Does it ever stop? If I were big enough so I could pinch the universe

between my fingers, could I see my house? (Har har again!) Or would things move way too fast and be too small to see? And what would my night sky look like?

So that brings me to this question, and I'm serious: Why isn't dead like light?

Chris lifted his dip pen from the diary and gave his pulsing mind a respite. Such intense and wild thinking about difficult subjects often made his head hurt. He closed his aching eyes and rubbed his temples, recalling how perilous that action once was. Then he looked out the window at Dr. Samuel's house, wondering, beckoning. A thin layer of snow covered the steep roof, but he could still see the outline of each slate shingle. A trail of smoke from one of many copper chimney pots rose slowly in the crisp blue sky. The Tudor was one of Sandra's favorite art subjects. Many variations existed in her collection. She often embellished the doctor's home, making it much larger and more elaborate than it already was. "He deserved it," she liked to say. Because of the around-the-clock care he extended to them after Sandra had been diagnosed with breast cancer, Chris and Janey gladly included him in their picture-world fantasy, further indulging him with servants. In that fantasy, Janey suggested pairing Sandra up with Dr. Sam, whose real-world wife had divorced him (ran away with the "lawn boy," Victor likes to tell us, though Katie never mentioned it) before Victor moved them to the Lone Oak community. But Chris was against this arrangement, for selfish reasons. That sound union made his dream-pairing with Katie unthinkable. He had never written any specific role for her in the story, other than hoping for what she once was. But his anger toward her betrayal was still there, and it was always tempting.

Chris thought he heard the doorbell ring, and he felt an impossible hope rising in his chest. He waited anxiously to hear it again. When the chiming repeated, Chris eagerly cast aside all doubt. He sprung from the bed and stuffed the diary under the mattress. Then he snatched the two folded pieces of paper on his dresser and bolted from his room. He ran past Janey's bedroom. Her door was open. He stopped for a second and peered into this unabashed shrine to all things soft and frilly and "cute," and saw her in Auntie Monica's hand-me-down canopy bed with her back to him, sleeping soundly beneath the pink daisy comforter. Perfect. He slowly closed the door, then flew down the foyer staircase, nearly stumbling. He paused to catch his breath, then quickly ran his hand through his hair. But his heart was still beating furiously. No one on this Earth had such power over him, could make him this nervous and crazy. Was she really here? He could barely stand the suspense. Chris gripped the handle and pulled the door open. A cold blast struck him, and swirled about.

With the sunlight at her back, a young woman stood in the doorway, motionless. The light was piercing, and he had trouble seeing her face. Then his eyesight adjusted as the wind died, and Chris—now feeling his joy die with those winds—could tell that Katie, too, seemed surprised that they were staring at each other. Even worse, Chris realized with much agony just how long it had been since they had seen each other. Katie looked different. She was taller than he remembered. And the young teen face that had occupied his endless fantasies had transformed. With hardly a hint of makeup, her lips were nonetheless fuller, her long-lashed blue eyes were larger, and her high, pronounced cheek bones and perfect skin gave her the intimidating look of a young and handsome woman. Yeah, she was not a lie. Way beyond fake, phony “girlie” pretty, and confident of those strong looks—and gently stepping away from him into her most beautiful and healthy years, knowing just as her father did that she could have the world, or whatever shiny parts she found pleasing. She even dressed like an adult from that rich world where she dwelled, just across their bottomless backyard void. Katie wore high, laced black boots and a long, shimmering white coat with soft white scarf wrapped around a fur collar as fluffy as new-fallen snow. Her hands were tucked into a large white muff. She stared down at him, and Chris suddenly felt like a child again, hopelessly inadequate and poor and foolish. Her shock confirmed his fears.

Though Katie had been their loyal and ever-smiling babysitter, and never encouraged any of his budding romantic notions, Chris nevertheless had—because of her loving and gentle ways, which brought welcome relief and joy into his troubled existence—made the unfortunate decision to elevate her to sacred status. The perfect being, one of a kind, never to come along again. And he slowly intertwined fact and fantasy about her until she became an obsession. He recalled the pure thrill of seeing her face for the first time, when she stepped so unsuspecting through this guarded door of their prison, eager to fulfill Sandra’s call for help—and how that moment forever changed his world for better and worse. Now he was paying dearly for that error.

Katie may have sensed his fragile ego was crumbling, for she quickly summoned a bright, full smile with those perfect teeth. “Christopher,” she said with her always surprising, made-to-order sultry tone, “how are you? I haven’t seen you in ages, have I? May I come in?”

Chris stepped aside. He never liked the way she called him so formally by his formal first name. Even with that wonderfully odd tone, both innocent and alluring, it sounded so...formal. And respectful. Like when old people talked to each other in church, fearing the lightning bolts from heaven, or when babysitters talked to their... He knew where that tone came from. Chris wanted her to think of him in a much more friendly way. Still,

his heart fluttered wildly as he stared at her so intently, and he could not look away even if he wanted to. It was hard to believe that she was finally here. “Yeah,” he said, trying not to sound excited. Already, he worried about what to say, how to act, and could feel his throat tightening. Could she see him blushing? “Sure.” How he hated his boyish tone, made worse by the throat tightening, which made him blush even more.

Once Katie entered the foyer, Chris shut the door, then stood in the warm, soft glow of her benevolent presence, his embarrassment cooling. This was one angel allowed into his protected, logical world at any time. Special dispensation granted, no doubt about it.

Katie removed the hand muff and set it on the foyer table. “You know me—always with the cold hands,” she said. “But you know the old saying about that. I can’t stay long, but I wanted to stop in and say hello. It’s so good to see you. You’re getting so tall and muscular—such a handsome young man. I hardly recognized you.”

Having just received a compliment uttered in the sincere but unconvincing manner of his Auntie Monika, Chris suddenly wished—as always—that he were taller and more muscular and older than his present puny state. “Yeah,” he said.

“I understand that you made the...football team?”

He was thrilled that she knew, that she found it impressive. “Yeah, I did.”

“And the telescope?”

Sudden deflation. “Yeah?”

“Getting bored with it?”

Now, disappointment. “No, I’ve been out there.” She hadn’t noticed him standing in the dark like the lovesick fool that he was.

“That’s good, I’m glad to hear that. I’ll come out the next time I see you there, I promise. Then you can show me that star again—you know, the closest one to Earth.”

Sudden encouragement. “You mean the Sun?”

“The Sun? Oh, yes, I suppose that’s right. Of course.” She covered her mouth and laughed. “I meant the next-closest star—what was it you called it? Alpha something...”

“Alpha Centauri?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Actually, Proxima Centauri is closer. But we can’t see either one from here. I think it was Sirius that we were looking at. In winter, it’s the brightest star in the night sky—in the Winter Circle, just above the southern horizon.”

“Yes, that was it—wasn’t it? The brightest.”

Chris suddenly felt stupid for lecturing her like some nerd, and he feared to say anything else.

Katie seemed to sense his embarrassment, and grabbed his arm with excitement. “Yes, I recall now. You told me the name, and I said, ‘Are you serious?’ And you laughed at my pathetic little joke. Well, that’s what I get for trying to be smart about things my father and you care about. Whichever star you choose is fine with me.”

Translation? You’re still a nerd.

Katie removed her grasp, but he could still feel her electric touch, as if his skin had swelled—yet another reminder of the amazing power this young woman always had over him, one that he wanted to feel again and again, and never give up. Chris grinned and nodded, but he wondered why he never had enough sense to keep his mouth shut regarding things people didn’t care about. Of course, it didn’t matter, really. With this brief but eye-opening encounter, Chris realized that he would never be with her. And he conceded that his fantasies about her—like all the rest of them—had been silly, childish, and unrealistic. That was glaringly obvious to him. Besides being older and rich—something he could never overcome—Katie seemed happy and content with life. Sure, she was a “herd-running pagan” (as Matt, despite his radical religious views, liked to call all public-schoolers who reveled in its social activities). But those designations, combined with her beauty and popularity, which went hand-in-hand, gave her distinct advantages and benefits. She would—Hell, she already was having a different teen life than he ever would, going to all kinds of sporting events, parties, and dances, and thinking they were fun. Then one day, if he took no action, she’d be off to college and he’d never see her again, leaving him behind to fight his private boyhood wars. But this visit did help her cause. He decided to take more mental notes before he took up the pen.

“So how’s your father?” she said cautiously.

Her mood turned gloomy, and the abruptness startled him. “He’s still around.”

“And Janey?”

“She’s upstairs sleeping. Want me to get her?”

“No, no, leave her be. But my dad wants to see her.”

Chris frowned. “About what?”

“She hasn’t been to his office in a while—and neither have you.”

“That’s Victor’s fault.”

“I know, and I’m not blaming you. But you should make it a habit.”

“What can I do? He won’t take her.”

“My father’s always been there for you, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t need to wait for Victor to do anything. Just bring her over to our house. In fact, you should do it today. He’s home. He can take a look at her there.”

“Well, I can get her now, if you want.”

“Wait till she awakens.” Katie smiled. “Now...you have something for me, I believe?”

“Oh...right.” Chris handed her a copy of Janey’s wish list, then stuffed his into his back pocket.

Katie unfolded the piece of paper. “Not much here again, I see.”

“She knows not to expect much.”

“But she still believes?” Katie said softly, as if Janey were standing here. Chris nodded.

“That’s good, too.”

Chris marveled at how her views reflected Sandra’s—and Janey’s, too. And though he no longer agreed with them, it gave him comfort to hear them. Katie had spent much time with Sandra as she taught his mother how to sketch and paint. With Katie’s urging, they often discussed religion. Towards the end, Katie even attended church with them. Dr. Samuel tolerated the whole conversion process. But since he was a “man of science,” they could tell he wasn’t pleased.

Katie glanced at the list once more. Her forehead crinkled. “She wants you to sing?”

“Yeah.”

The ends of her mouth began to curl up, but thankfully she did not laugh. “This is a special gift to her?”

“I guess.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“I don’t know. I might.”

“I think you will.”

“Yeah, probably. A Christmas song.”

“Yes, on Christmas. I know you will—I just do.” Katie smiled as her eyes returned to the list. Then she frowned. “It says here that she also wants you to cry.”

“Yeah. I can tell you right now, I never, ever wanna have to do that.”

“Not manly enough?”

“There’s a little more to it. Something about breaking a spell.”

“A spell,” she said flatly.

“It’s nothing, really. There is no spell.”

She nodded. “You seem to be the main theme of her list.”

“It’s just part of her plan to save my wicked soul.” Chris thought his clever, adult-sounding response would impress her and draw some

laughter. But Katie just stared at him for a moment, looking oddly worried. “What’s this next item? A...a vacuum cleaner?”

“Yeah, she hates dust bunnies. The vacuum we have is getting old. Just kinda pushes the dirt around.”

“But it’s Christmas. She’s just a young girl!” Katie put her hand to her mouth. She looked as if she were about to cry. “I’m sorry, I keep forgetting.” Then her eyes brightened as she read another item. “Horseshoes?”

“Yeah, for protection. It’s a long story—something my mother told us. She shouldn’t have, really. It just stuck in Janey’s head.” He intentionally left out the “Mine, too” part.

Katie appeared worried again, but seemed to understand. “What are we going to do about this?”

“I’ll find stuff in the storeroom.”

“The storeroom?”

“Yeah. Victor used to have horseshoe pits at our other house. I’m sure all that stuff is packed away. There’s lots of old stuff down there, especially in the trunk. Real old. But there’s some good stuff, too. I don’t know what you call them. Heirlooms, maybe, I guess. I wrapped some up for her last year. Marked them From St. Nicholas. She really seemed to like them. Actually, she thought my mom left them under the tree for her. So I’m gonna do that again.”

“The storeroom, yes—yes, I know.” Tears stood in her eyes. “Oh, Chris, that’s so sweet.” She brought her hand to her trembling lips.

The car horn sounded.

Still visibly shaken, Katie withdrew a coin purse from her pocket, loosened the delicate drawstrings, and stuffed the list into the purse. Then she grabbed the hand muff and turned quickly to open the door. “I’m sorry, I have to go,” she said as the cold air seized him. “Don’t forget to bring her over later, okay? I’m going to bring her something, too.” She headed out.

His heart thumped in his chest, but in a bad, aching way, tearing itself apart. She was leaving him, again. “Sure. Hey, wait, I didn’t mean to—”

Katie turned to face him and wiped her tears. “I miss you two, do you know that? I wish I could be here more. But I have a different life now. So do you. I know you understand this.”

The car horn sounded once more.

Chris was stunned. Her words punched a hole in the gloom. It felt strange and wonderful to actually hear her talk so lovingly about them, to know that she still thought of them that way, that he still mattered, even with the distractions, even though she was now with him.

“I know what you’re going through. Every bit of it. I really do. And I’m so, so sorry that she’s not here to help you.” Katie touched him on the

cheek. “You take care, okay? Don’t ever hesitate to call me, for whatever reason. I promise I’ll see you soon.”

Chris wanted to say those words he longed to say to her but never did, but as usual, his emotions jammed, and he kept coldly silent. With the mix of polar-opposite emotions pulling at him, ripping him in two, Chris quickly brought his left hand to his face and pressed hard to capture the tear she left there. Then he stood in the doorway and the biting air and watched Katie as she climbed into the passenger side of the red antique sports car parked in the driveway, lined earlier with the candle bags. His gaze switched to the grinning, masculine face at the wheel, and he felt his jaw tighten. She waved before the car backed from the driveway. Then the car accelerated with a squeal, and she was gone, racing into another story separate from his.

Don’t leave me—not again. Chris heard the chiming of his heart as it shattered like glass.

The hammering in his ears returned, as did the pressure in his chest. His throat tightened, and his eyes felt as if they were sinking into his head. What to do about her teardrop? It was her, on his cheek. If he removed his hand, the tear might disintegrate, and the precious gift would be lost. Still, he couldn’t stand here for an eternity with his hand pressed to his face. He was certain the neighborhood had already erupted in gossip. Resigned to fate, Chris carefully removed his left hand from his cheek. He held it out, chest-high, and turned it slightly perpendicular to the porch so he could examine his palm in the daylight. The teardrop had, indeed, disintegrated. Its remnants trickled down through a line in his palm. But when the stream reached the right edge of his hand, a dangling teardrop formed. It separated into a perfect orb that seemed to suspend itself in the air, glinting in the sun, reflecting his astonished face, before the teardrop fell toward the cold concrete slab. When it landed, the drop exploded like a starburst, and quickly froze into a crystal before evaporating. He blinked a few times, but not hard, just to make sure he was seeing clearly. Then Chris looked down the street once more. Already, he wondered when—or if—she would return.

And then Janey screamed.

Shocked from his trance, Chris slammed the door and dashed up the stairs to Janey’s room. Wearing a long-sleeve pajama top with white and pink hearts, Janey was sitting up but with her back to him, pointing to the sun-splashed window framed by white lace curtains on the far wall alongside her canopy bed. “The bug, the bug,” she said. “Kill it.”

Chris’ eyes brightened as he watched the small white insect flutter against the window. The deadliest of them all. But it was supposed to attack Victor, not Janey. More fantasy boldly leaking out, becoming real as the hour drew near? *No!* Keeping his eyes focused on the window, Chris quickly

skirted the bed. He felt his fear rising, but he wasn't going to admit it aloud. Besides, for Janey's sake, and his, sanity had to be maintained. "C'mon, Janey, it's just a moth, not the butterfly."

"No, it's not."

"That was just a story."

"I don't care—kill it!"

Chris held his hand out, watching intently as the moth fluttered around. When it stopped, Chris slammed his cupped hand over it, making sure his palm did not squash it, giving it the power it craved. Then as he felt the insect's wings beating furiously, he slowly closed his fingers around the dreaded thing until it could only squirm. "There, no more moth," Chris said. He turned away from the window so he did not have to face her.

"This isn't time for a bug rescue. Did you kill it?"

Chris headed for the door, and wondered where he could release it. Had to release it, because if he didn't and gave in...

"Let me see," Janey said.

"Will you relax? I'm just going to flush it down the toilet."

"Let me see."

"Janey—" Chris turned to lecture her about her mistrust. But when he did, he saw the thick trail of dark red blood that ran from her nose and mouth, and branched out down the side of her face, matting her hair. And then he saw the dark red stain that covered nearly half of her white down pillow. A loud boom exploded in his ear like a canon shot, and with the storm of emotion howling in his head, the glowing black hole appeared before him. It was swirling and flashing, gobbling up the room. He closed his eyes briefly, hoping Janey's image would reset to normal. But seconds later, when he realized that nothing had changed, he trembled. Something was happening. But not the unworldly terror he feared. "Janey?"

With her mouth open and her brow furrowed, Janey glanced down to look for the thing she seemed to suspect was crawling on her. Suddenly, her head snapped to the left. And her eyes locked onto the ghastly pillow. When Janey returned her gaze to him, those eyes were lit with a horror she had never, ever displayed, telling him everything. Then she ran her fingers through her matted hair and stared at her bloodstained fingertips.

Chris closed his eyes again, and felt the thing in his hand transforming, no longer squirming, now the sting of its icy crystals. Then he gazed at Janey, bleeding so abnormally before him. What? *What?* While the fire crawled across his face and his ears began to ring, he thought of Epiphany, heartless Epiphany. Epiphany all over again. A voice he had heard only once before shouted outside of his mind: *What have you been doing? This is how you face your fears? You know what you did to her!*

The wild and beautiful fantasy, which he had painstakingly assembled all these years to tap into its power, to give him power so he could cope and not fail, popped into his mind all at once. A kaleidoscope of images that suddenly exploded, scattering like buckshot into the edges of the swirling, flashing blackness—everything, all of it. When the ringing subsided, it left an unsettling calm. Just like that, it was over, the power gone again, his mind clear and focused once more as he stood there in his burning shame. He could conjure nothing, only Janey, bleeding Janey—and then, bleeding Sandra.

The nightmare from which he could not awake.

They were still in it.

“Oh, Janey, no—no,” he said, as if the words would make the nightmare go away. But when it didn’t, Chris tightened his fist, and crushed the moth.

Treatment

After her funeral, Chris often walked his final days at St. Boniface like a zombie. In the crowded halls, his classmates pushed past him, desperately trying to get seated in class before the bell rang. He didn't care about bells, or the punishment doled out for not being on time. He felt as if he were pressed against the inside a drifting bubble, occasionally knocked about as the thundering herd rushed below, each member trying to sit next to the one he or she loved. But from that bubble, he saw past his youthful dreams of acceptance and adoration, past the older visions of success and empire that his father often boasted about, convinced it would all come true—all the way to the dark clouds gathering in the distance, no longer feeling eternal, or blissfully ignorant of their ultimate fate. Where there would not be another dawn for her or him, and they would no longer walk the Earth, or remember a thing, or have anything extraordinary—even magical—happen that would reveal an amazing answer to the biggest question of all.

And so now, this view of life remained as he looked upon Janey.

She sat in the reclined lounge chair and stared at the ceiling-mounted television as if it weren't there. A warmed blanket covered most of her body, except her right arm, which lay palm up atop the armrest. The dispensing gizmo, attached to the pole from which the clear chemo bag hung, towered over her. The machine made a strange grunting sound with every successful drip, as if happy to be in control.

Chris sat motionless next to her on a metal folding chair, pretending that he cared what was on the news channel as if nothing were wrong, afraid to emit any negative energy that might betray the panic coursing furiously within. He was stunned by the speed with which the peaceful day had turned into a tragedy. They both were. Neither had expected, or wanted, to see this room again.

But the events earlier in the day forever changed what was supposed to be their best Christmas ever.

Once Chris got the nose and gum bleeding under control, he called Doctor Samuel, who rushed over to the house. With a calm but concerned demeanor, the doctor took her temperature. Then he examined Janey as if

he were at the grocery store, inspecting a tomato—then her teeth, as if she were a horse. Chris knew why the doc was acting so. But it still irked him. All the while, the doctor looked way too concerned for a man inspecting produce and livestock. Finally, Dr. Samuel asked her questions about breathing, stamina, and pain. Afterwards, he left the bedroom to make a phone call. Upon returning, he announced that they were going for a “ride” in an ambulance, just as a “precaution.” But they had been through these precautionary trips before. They knew Janey’s situation was serious. Ambulance rides were “outrageous,” as Victor had often complained. But, out of legal ramifications, even he had agreed to them. So what did the doctor suspect? They were too afraid to ask. “Where’s Victor?” the doctor also had inquired, but he seemed to know the answer.

Once at the hospital, blood was drawn. Then it was on to a sterile room filled with stainless steel tables and trays, hanging lights, tubes and wires, and a lot of strange machines that beeped and gurgled and buzzed. By now, Janey was in a hospital gown. Somewhere in the whirl, Chris discovered that Victor had consented over the phone to the next procedure, in which Chris participated.

Janey lay face down on a table. Chris held her hand. A needle was inserted as if it were a corkscrew into her pelvic bone to extract the marrow. “Ow-ie” was all she said. But she nearly crushed his hand. He wanted to smack the doctor for causing her such pain.

Then suddenly, they were whisked into a sterile common area, its rooms separated by curtains. There, they looked at each other in confused silence as they listened to all the other medical dramas around them, wondering when definitive news would come. While they waited, some well-intentioned nurse poked her head in and happily assured them that Victor was on his way to provide support and comfort.

And then Dr. Samuel entered into the room, suddenly there, in all his greatness. He always had a professional intensity about him that Victor could never achieve: straight, jet black hair trimmed and parted neatly on the right, fine clothing clean and pressed, black shoes polished. He just reeked of power and confidence. He knew what he wanted out of life, had the intelligence and temperament to get it, and that “it” would be enduringly satisfying. But accompanying that power was a prevalent sadness that Chris couldn’t fully understand. Did he miss Sandra more than Chris ever knew? Was he, too, dealing with bad memories of this place? The doctor seemed oddly flustered, and apologized for not remembering when human biology was taught in school. Then he told Janey about her blood. “Some of your white cells aren’t normal,” he had said. “And when you have a lot of white cells that aren’t normal, it can make you real tired. Not enough red cells, you see. But, we can start fixing this—

today. Typically, leukemia patients have an eighty percent chance of beating this, Janey—eighty percent. That’s a real good number.” But Chris saw that same doubt in the doctor’s eyes that he displayed when giving his required pep talks while Sandra was dying. There was more talk of using part of the insurance money to pay for the chemo. Dr. Samuel told them that Victor had already tried to secure control of these emergency funds, but Pommerance refused. Chris suspected that the doctor had already decided to pay for everything, to calm Victor and keep things moving forward. Finally, a nurse advocate took over and gave a hasty, smiley-faced child’s version of chemo orientation before Janey landed in the reclining chair.

Now Chris wanted desperately to say just the right words that would make her smile, if only for a moment. But the anger and the guilt and the gnawing questions kept him silent. Leukemia? Where did this come from? And then suddenly, miraculously, the perfect words welled up from his heart. “I’d switch places with you in an instant if I could,” he said.

Janey looked at him with big, shiny eyes. He knew she wanted to say something sassy and clever to comfort him. But the extraordinary events of the day inhibited their typical banter. She couldn’t even smile. Instead, she returned her empty gaze to the television.

Feeling helpless, Chris looked around the room. This certainly was no place for a young girl. With its row of tightly packed lounge chairs that rimmed its windowless perimeter, the chemo room looked like some morbid salon, all decorated for Christmas. Most of the patients were old. Some were bald. Others were bald and ashen. Many would beat the odds, and receive applause—and a new life—for their efforts. But Chris could tell which patients wouldn’t be around much longer. He wondered which camp Janey was in.



They sat there for hours as each clear plastic bag slowly collapsed and shriveled, its contents draining through the IV and into Janey’s body. When that “protocol” finally ended (*doctors like words that lie, too*), the nurse stopped by with a new round of warmed blankets and a large needle-less syringe filled with a pink liquid, which she attached to the IV. Then she put on a smile and talked pleasantly to Janey as she slowly pushed the plunger. But Chris sensed a hint of apology from her as well. He knew this stuff would make Janey nauseous, and eventually cause her hair to fall out in clumps.

The hair thing was the next big hurdle. Sandra had experienced it, too. She had claimed that it would be “no big deal” when it happened. But when it did, her world crumbled—reminded constantly afterward, every time she looked into the mirror, that something was terribly wrong, that she was

battling for her life. With the powerful drugs Janey was receiving, the blessed event would take a week or so to occur.

When the nurse finished injecting the drug, she gave them a friendly reminder about the next chemo session a week from this day. Janey received about a half hour to “rest.” Then Victor made a sudden appearance.

“Poor kiddo,” he said as he stroked Janey’s head with those busted, crunching fingers. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? You’re a strong one, aren’t you? No surprise there. Sam thinks you’ll tolerate this well. Better than your mom, huh?” He was singing a joyous opera.

“Sam,” Chris thought. Like now they’re best buds. It’s not gonna work.

Janey squirmed and kept silent.

“Can we go?” Chris said. Victor was always happy when someone else paid the bills.

Victor looked at Chris as if he were in a bar and wanted to fight. “Yeah, sure, no problem. One big happy family.”



Chris didn’t say much to Janey on the way home—just an occasional check on her health status. She would nod or shake her head, but still refused to speak. Otherwise, Janey slept most of the time. Victor kept quiet, too. But the well-oiled wheels inside his seething brain seemed to be turning fast in much different directions as he plotted a new and devious course.

Once they arrived at the house, Chris helped Janey into fresh pajamas and put her to bed, linens already changed. When he attempted to turn off the light on her nightstand, Janey finally spoke: “Leave it on, please.”

He knew where that came from. “Okay,” Chris said, encouraged by her tone. “Anything else? Some grammies, maybe?”

Janey rolled onto her back and looked at him. In a rare moment of weakness, tossing Heaven aside, she said: “I want to stay here with you.”

Her words pierced his heart and burned onto his brain, and Chris saw the fear in her eyes. Chris nodded rapidly, repeatedly, and he did all he could to keep his tears from flowing. As usual, his better emotions fizzled, and the words got stuck in his throat. “Yeah...yeah, okay. Yeah. Good night, Janey. Pleasant dreams.” His declaration of worthlessness—even his own words disgusted him. So he did something he had never done before: he bent down and kissed her on the cheek. Her fragile smile told him he should have done this long ago.

When Janey closed her eyes to say her prayers, Chris slipped from the room, carefully shutting the door behind him. He closed his eyes and sighed, and it became hard to breathe. It really was happening again. Then he saw Victor standing in the darkened foyer, the glow of the hated Christmas tree illuminating his backside. Victor reached up with a clenched fist, then

beckoned Chris with the repeated curl of a thick forefinger. Chris descended the stairs and followed his father into the forbidden den, its wooden shelving crammed with trophies, past and present. Victor closed the door and poured himself a drink at the wet bar. Apprehensive, Chris plopped down in the shabby upholstered chair opposite his father's desk.

"Your sister's very sick," Victor said. He eased himself into his high-backed vinyl chair.

"Yeah, I know."

Victor took a sip of his drink, ice cubes clinking. "No, I don't think you do."

Chris tried to gauge his father's odd mood. Was he happy? Was he sad? Was he worrying again about what all this would cost? Through it all, money still didn't seem to be an issue, as it had with Sandra's illness, verifying Chris' theory about Dr. Samuel's benevolence. So what was the point of this meeting?

"Sam thinks she might have A-L-L," Victor said. "Acute lymphocytic leukemia. Know what acute means?"

"No."

"It means she's in deep shit. Her illness is in a severe stage—and it's rapidly progressing."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Not mine, damn you," he said, coolly. "I'm not taking the blame for this." He took another sip. "I knew you would get around to that. You're always blaming other people for bad shit. Where in Hell does that come from, huh? Never mind. That's why we're having this little chat. If you want to blame someone, blame your mother."

Chris rolled his eyes. "I don't believe this."

"No? Would you believe Sam, then?"

Chris frowned.

"Yeah, he's the one who gave me the news. I know he fucked up—fucked up big time. Should have been watching for this. Could sue the son-of-a-bitch, I suppose. We'll see. Might be hard to do. And you know how much I love getting in bed with those parasites. Depends on what happens to your sister. I'll let him dig his grave for now." He paused as those thick dark brows lowered and his narrowed eyes flared. "Shouldn't even be her doctor. Specializes in adults. But that's your fault. You called him. Don't ever pull that crap again."

"She doesn't want anyone else," Chris said.

"Yeah, well...we'll see about that." Then his expression softened, as if pleasant thoughts appeared. "Anyway, he thinks it may be genetic. Don't ask me how. I don't get all that bullshit. He was babbling on and on about subtypes, translocation, and—oh, yeah—a specific gene modification. Like I

know what in Hell that means. You know how he is. He's your buddy. But he says he's going to look into it." Victor laughed, though it sounded threatening. "A little late for that. You see, little girls don't get leukemia from walking to school without a hat. Nine times out of ten, it comes from a parent—something like that. Your mom's the one with the cancer. She probably got it from someone on her side. And now she's passed it on to Janey. What do you think of that, huh? Some Christmas present."

"You make me sick."

Victor laughed again in his aggressive way. "Oh, yeah, I know—I'm such a meanie. Don't you just wish I'd shrivel up and blow away? I know what you two think of me. I hear you talking. I remember everything. But you know what? I don't care. You have a roof over your head. I'm still paying the bills. You'd be nothing without me." He sounded remarkably in control and confident—too confident, for Victor.

"You want her to die, don't you?" Chris said.

"You're nuts."

"You'd get all her money, wouldn't you?"

"Your mother didn't see this coming, did she? Serves her right." He took a congratulatory sip. But then his eyes glazed over, and his expression hardened. "First she robs me blind and then she gives it all to you. I'm her goddamn husband. I put up with her crap all those years. Why shouldn't I get something out of it? Why shouldn't I get it all? Christ, she even stuck me with that lousy burial tab."

"She paid for that."

"With my money!"

Feeling the heat building across the back of his head, and the urge to kill, Chris sprung from the chair and started out.

"Keep this conversation to yourself," Victor said. "She's got enough worries. You'll only make things worse, like last time. Then you'll have another death on your hands."

Chris slammed the door behind him, then stopped. The anger—there was so much of it coursing through his veins, he could hear it rushing past his eardrums, building intense pressure in his chest and head, hammering in his ears, sparkling in his eyes. He grew light-headed and weak, and the hallway shifted around wildly, appearing randomly before him like framed pictures, a movie without cohesion. Chris closed his eyes and took some deep breaths to stop the shifting and quiet the growing nausea, then he slowly ascended the stairs and entered his room. Jamming his hand beneath the mattress, he gripped the diary and yanked it free. Now he stared at the title, and snarled. *The Book of Everything, or the book of nothing? Happy thoughts, and childish stories. Yeah, yeah, I'm awake.* He whirled to his left and slam-dunked the accursed book into the bedside trash can.

Chris returned to the foyer and opened the closet's bi-fold doors. With his strength restored, he felt like a caged animal. He needed to run. He found his old black ski jacket and hat, and slipped them on. But the fire in his brain remained, as always, and made him think of things he, in happier times, wouldn't consider.

Once outside, Chris looked about the silent neighborhood, covered in white, noting all the lights and decorations on the houses and lawns, everything oblivious to their plight. Then he turned and looked at the tree in their window. He could not believe how the joy had been snatched from the glorious scene played out the previous night. *Best Christmas ever*. Deep down, he knew it was his fault. All of it was. It fit the pattern. He, like the doctor, should have seen this coming. Yesterday had been much too pleasant, had taken him much too high—like the roller coaster, and the bell curve—as he floated in the clouds of his childish fantasy. Now it was time to crash and burn in this heartless creation, as he was never really allowed to experience any lasting joy. It was the Curse, after all. Everyone he loved died, and everyone he hated thrived. Well, he had had enough of this unjust punishment. They had already been pushed to the limit—far too many times. And now this? *Sometimes, you gotta fight back*. An ultimatum needed to be shouted with rage and with clenched fists raised to the heavens. But not here, where the heartless and the gossips could hear him, or the spiteful Deity could hide behind thick clouds and pelt his face with ice. He needed to return to the source of all his torment...to the home base...to the scene of his crime.

Chris scooped up one of the unlit candle bags, then headed for St. Boniface.

The Church

Sometimes, when Victor got really drunk and convinced the unsuspecting that taking him to her place was a really good idea, he would lose his car keys. No matter. He had the ability to walk tremendous distances—sometimes all night, in all kinds of weather—and find his way home before the dawn. What he thought about (*if he thinks at all*) was a mystery to Chris. All he knew was that Sandra would willingly, without uttering a protest, take Victor back, with spare keys in hand, to the bar at which he had hatched his conspiracy so he could drive off to “work.” This part, he never understood.

So Chris found it ironic, and a little unsettling, that he was walking late at night in the snow and sleet through the old Cottagewood neighborhood to St. Boniface. He had to, now that he decided to throw down the gauntlet. Another oasis of tranquility before the developers arrived, Cottagewood was sandwiched between Lone Oak and the church. In the summer, it was a leafy neighborhood with winding streets, a meandering stream, and small but well-crafted houses of stone, stucco, and wood that—because she always wanted to live there—helped inspire Sandra to paint her cozy cottages and dreamy villages. More than that, it had been the inner circle’s stomping grounds, where Matt Cavanaugh lived, where they strolled idly and discussed all that mattered to them, and where they (mostly Matt) learned to flirt with older girls.

Chris trudged ever closer to the church, sloshing through the snow. The memories of happier times returned, and Chris was surprised how his journey through the sparkly, sleepy neighborhood calmed him, if only temporarily. But by the time he reached the stone arch bridge at the western edge of the neighborhood, the gloom and the anger returned, and he still found it maddening and impossible to believe how his sister was thrown, without much warning, into a battle for her life. A black nightmare had descended upon him again, enveloping him, and now he was trying his best to punch out of it.

St. Boniface was only a few blocks from the bridge, and when Chris arrived at the church’s wide front steps, he gazed up at the looming, twin-

tower façade. The giant rose window was shining from the light within, but Chris knew that, at this late hour, the massive front doors were locked. But there was a way in. Every current and former altar boy knew that the door behind the right bell tower remained unlatched so that the most-devout had permanent access to the warm but humbling environment within. It was the same door through which he and Matt and Larry entered during that fateful lunch hour last spring. He had not been back since his mandated confession.

Chris skirted the tower and entered the courtyard and old graveyard that connected the church to the school. A shrine to the Blessed Virgin, covered by a white pergola laced with thick dried vines and attached to the church, stood in the courtyard's center. There, the parishioners crowded their candle bags before a manger scene, complete with real straw. Chris approached the manger, reached down to grab a candle from one of the many bags, then used it to light his own candle before adding the bag to the scene. He thought of Sandra and muttered a rusty, half-forgotten prayer that drifted away with his smoky breath. Then he slowly and reverently backed away until he reached the bell tower. Brushing the snow from his coat, Chris slipped into the small chapel in tower base, where Janey had been baptized. (*Janey calls it her private chapel, where its altar tomb became her gilded box.*) He pulled open an interior door and entered the main vestibule, lit by the many brass picture lights that lit the extensive art collection hanging within ornate frames on the plastered walls. Now, his attitude had changed with the warming temperature, and once again he felt rebellious. He had spent many hours with Sandra and Katie in the vestibule, studying the carefully selected Renaissance and Romantic-era reprints by Caspar David Friedrich (no relation, he was assured), Gustave Dore, Pieter Bruegel, and John Martin. Sandra did not intend to copy their style or subject matter, nor did Katie encourage it. But both admired each artist's ability to grab the viewer and instill a sense of awe, dread, and humility. These were qualities that did not go unnoticed by the old and fiery Irish pastor, Father O'Hara, who selected them for a dastardly purpose, or by Chris, who became enthralled by them. Chris wrote about each sketch or painting extensively in the book, and used them in the story, particularly Dore's *Lucifer, King of Hell* (selected "to inspire fear," Sandra had explained—what awaited them in the fiery mountain chamber of darkness), the *White Rose* ("to inspire hope"—the portal in and out of the former and nonexistent Heaven), and Bruegel's *The Little Tower of Babel* ("to show man's arrogance and folly"—part of the monster's terrible war machine, as a fitting artwork). Seeing the paintings now, with Janey's questionable future weighing so heavily on his throbbing mind, only made him angrier. It was, as Victor liked to say, "a bunch of nonsense."

Chris made his way to the center-aisle doors, gripped the handles, and flung the doors open. He caught a whiff of incense and votive candles. Then he walked boldly into the dimly lit nave and scanned the long rows of wooden pews for signs of the faithful, his boot steps on the marble floor echoing throughout. The church was empty. He kept on walking down the main aisle as his gaze found the main altar, far ahead. Twenty-foot balsams, twinkling with tiny white lights, flanked the sanctuary. Then he glanced to the left at John Martin's blazing *Pandæmonium*, which he dreaded the most, strategically placed above the confessional as a reminder to them all where they would go if they didn't repent. Even now, with his anger never greater, the painting gave Chris the willies, knowing how he used it, and that it was possible to spend an eternity in such a terrible place, even if it were a lie. He couldn't help recall the day Fr. O'Hara—upon hearing Chris' required and humiliating confession—yelled at him so loudly from the confessional's center stall, the others in line ran away. No more running. Not tonight.

Reaching the center of the church, Chris turned around and examined the choir loft, searching for more signs of unwanted onlookers, noting how odd it felt to be back again, recalling the days that Victor himself, before his anger destroyed him, had sung up there during Mass, everyone hearing that dominant and magnificent tenor voice, turning to admire him, if only that hour. Finally, Chris shifted his fiery gaze to the vaulted ceiling and stared at the faded angelic frescoes. They seemed to be cowering, no clouds in sight.

"Hey, remember me—the heretic?" he shouted. Beads of sweat formed above his upper lip. "We've gone through this before. Haven't You had enough? Why do You keep doing this, huh? What do You need another angel for? You heard her. I know You did. She doesn't want to be with You. She wants to stay with me—me! Not on Your ceiling. I don't want to be alone!" His words echoed throughout the church, rattling the windows, shaking the dust from the beams. Then Chris reached into his back pocket and withdrew the folded piece of paper. "Here, see this?" he shouted once more at the now indifferent pudgy faces on the ceiling, waving the wish-list like a white flag. "Well, I'm adding one more thing. You know what it is. You have twenty-seven days—twenty-seven! If she doesn't get it, I'm coming back here—and not a second late. Then I'm really gonna show You what I think of Your Grand Design."

"Here, here, now," a man's raspy voiced called out from behind him. "What's all the shouting about? No shouting. No!"

Chris whirled around to see a bearded old man in a blue uniform standing in the vestibule, his knobby hands clenching the handle of a mop submerged in a wheeled metal bucket.

The old man, missing his right eye, squinted his left one—and then it shot open. “You!” he said. “What are you doing here? Lord, save us. Not good—not good!”

Chris recognized the man immediately. It was “John the Janitor,” as Chris’ snickering first-grade classmates had dubbed him. John was impaired, and of course had a hard time seeing. And he couldn’t hear very well, either. Chris remembered him as a quiet, slow-moving man who moved about the school like a ghost, but who never complained about having to clean up lunchtime rubbish, or vomit from a desk or classroom floor. It was easy to pull pranks on him, which they did often—making more messes after he cleaned up, getting him into trouble for his “lackluster” effort. Had he heard every angry word? The promise? Chris had to find out. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout. I just came to say some prayers.” Even Chris could tell his own statements were insincere, for they were laced with anger.

The old man’s expression turned placid, and he began moving his head about as if he could no longer see. “‘Prayers,’ you say. Yes, praise the Lord Almighty. Maybe you should try confession...you know, to help cleanse your soul. That’s what I would do, if I were you. If I were you.”

The suggestion, one Chris always resented, triggered an emotion and response that he could not keep tethered. All these foolish finger-waggerers, telling him what to do. “They already made me do that. I don’t need anymore cleansing. Isn’t that your job?”

Thankfully, the old man seemed unfazed by the sarcasm—as if he even knew what it was. He held onto the mop handle as if it were a cane, desperately needed to keep his balance. And he continued to move his head like a blind man. “Yes, clean the floors, but be quiet about it. I will. I will. Thank you. How about a second chance, just to get things right? I can do that, if you’ll let me. Please, I can. Thank you. While you’re in here, maybe you should ask for that instead of shouting. No shouting. No. That’s what I would do...if I were you. If I were you.”

Chris nodded slowly, his fears diminishing. He had forgotten just how feeble the man was. Perhaps he hadn’t heard everything. Maybe nothing. Maybe he was still the same old John the Janitor. Very likely, he was worse, would remember nothing, or—even better—wasn’t capable of convincing anyone what he thought he saw or heard. “Yeah,” Chris said, “yeah, maybe I should.” But the resentment lingered, and he just couldn’t help himself. “Thanks for the stellar advice.” It was always easy to feel superior to the feeble John the Janitor.

The old man frowned as his head stilled. “I think you should go, before you do something foolish. Come back when you’re ready. You can come back. But not now. Yes, thank you. You’re not supposed to be here, remember?”

“I remember. No one’s gonna let me forget, I guess.”

“Shoulda thought of that before you made a mess of this place. Always think of the consequences before you act. Always. Yes, I will, praise God. Terrible mess. Terrible. What am I supposed to do? But I’ll clean it, scrub it hard, if you give me another chance.”

“Yeah—yeah, sure, whatever it is you’re trying to say,” Chris said, staring quizzically at John, the anger retreating. It was time to go. No worries about this man. None whatsoever. Chris walked toward the janitor.

“Thank you, thank you,” John said. He turned his head slightly and narrowed his one good eye. “You doing all right? You don’t look well.”

“I don’t look well?” He scoffed, but this time held his tongue.

“Did you get into a fight or something? That’s not good. No fighting. No. Bad for the soul.”

Chris stood beside him. “You wouldn’t understand.”

A sadness swept over his ruddy face. “I know what you think of me. I have feelings, too. It hurts. And I do understand.” Then, just as quickly, the sadness—and lucidness—disappeared. “And I see just fine. I really do. The Child is coming!” With his eye wide open, he now beamed with joy.

“Sure you do, old man,” Chris said. Nothing worse than out-of-touch adults—who couldn’t handle their own lives—giving advice. Victor had taught him some things. Still, Chris felt regret for his anger, that poor John the Janitor had the misfortune of stumbling upon the intensely emotional and private drama. But Chris offered no apology. He couldn’t. Not this night. He pushed past John and out the main doors into the snow and cold, then slipped his hands into his coat pockets. His anger had been subdued, but it wasn’t purged. His outburst had serious tones to it, and he intended to uphold his promise of retribution if Janey did not survive. But for now, he had another important task to complete. And he stormed off into the frozen night, hoping his sister was still at rest.

The Gift

When Chris returned home from his trip to St. Boniface, he removed his wet hat and jacket and hung them on the vacant hooks of the coat tree beside the grandfather clock. Quickly slipping on a pocket sweatshirt to chase away the chill, he rushed up to Janey's room and carefully opened the door to check on her. The bedside lamp shined its protective light upon her, and she lay on her favorite side, facing him, her stuffed guards still crowded all around, though some had toppled over, helpless on the floor. The slow but steady rise and fall of the comforter told him that she was sleeping comfortably. He could feel a little fear emanating from her dreams. But there was also a strong determination to win, to stay with him, and her will inspired him, sparkling his mind with her magic. It was the perfect time to complete his task.

Returning to the foyer, Chris flicked on the wall switch for the basement light and without hesitation descended the stairwell. Then he opened the door to the darkened storeroom, which was directly below Victor's den (he could hear the constant thumping of the music, however muffled) and contemplated his next move. This was, after all, where all the evil once flowed from the hellish furnace, much like it did from the dark heart of Pandæmonium, in that other world. Much to his annoyance, despite the purge, that disturbing feeling still remained. The dome ceiling light of their partially finished basement was too far away to illuminate much of anything in here. Of course, there was a flashlight on his father's cluttered workbench. But that thing hadn't shined in years. He would have to stumble in the dark to find the pull cord. As he had confessed half-jokingly to Janey, stepping into this subterranean tomb had always been a somewhat frightful task. Even after his recent self-enlightenment, he suspected that the demons of their story lurked in every shadow.

Chris slowly pushed his way toward the center of the room through the rubble pile of stacked boxes as his right arm swung wildly in the dark in search of the pull cord. The furnace suddenly roared to life, startling him. Pandæmonium, no doubt. But now the row of flickering gas flames at the base of the furnace provided just enough devilish light to aid him in his

search. He grabbed the cord and tugged it, but the light did not go on. He tugged it again, then again. Still no light. "Great," he said loudly, to inject some sanity into the room. The grocery bag of assorted replacement bulbs was here somewhere, probably inside a box that was inside another box. (He couldn't remember the last time he saw it.) But it would take him longer to find the bulbs than the chest. That he could not endure. So he decided to bravely press on.

With his distorted shadow dancing wildly across the floor joists above, Chris pushed the stacked boxes aside, clearing a wide path from the furnace toward the cinder block wall. Suddenly, there it was: the oversized barrel-stave trunk with all the ancient things.

Eager to complete his sacred quest and retreat from this eerie place, Chris knelt before the unlocked trunk. He flipped up the two brass latches, and flung the dome top open.

Something jumped out at him.

"Damn it!" Chris nearly fell on his back. He shielded his eyes with his right forearm as a musty smell overcame him. Then he sprung to his feet and turned away. The mask. He forgot that he had used it to set a trap.

Chris took some deep breaths to calm his racing heart, then lowered his arm to stare at the roaring furnace. How he hated that mask. It was the most hideous thing on the planet. And being such a thing, it was wisely kept inside the lid's drop-down compartment. But just last year, in a moment of perceived brilliance, Chris had hung the mask on a wire connected to the lid. When an unsuspecting victim opened the trunk, the mask would swing out in all its ghastliness, causing said victim to run screaming up the stairs (as he did when he first discovered it), thus protecting the source of St. Nicholas' wondrous gifts. But now, with his heart still pounding, Chris decided that maybe he hadn't exercised the best judgment, and that the mask should quickly return to its proper hiding place.

One last deep breath, and Chris turned to face this horror. He still couldn't stare directly at it for more than a few moments. He was afraid that its hideous image would burn into his brain, and that when he closed his eyes at night, that thing would still be staring at him.

The top of the mask was the most peculiar. A tuft of long white fur lay between a set of brownish-white ram horns that sprouted upward just above each menacing red eye. The horns curled backwards and out to each side. But then, two more sets of horns curled wildly from the top of the furry white cap, while long black-and-white fur draped from the sides and chin. To ensure its revolting ugliness, the leather face, stretched across carved wood, was shriveled and blackened with rot. A long, pointy, human nose twisted down and over the mouth, which was frozen in a gaping smile that curled freakishly up and over the eyes. The slack jaw was disproportionately large

and lined with molars stained with decay and set in receding black gums. But the worst feature, by far, was the flat, blackish-red tongue that flopped out of the right side of the mouth. Chris could even smell its foul breath. The whole man-goat thing looked like road kill, flattened and left to rot. And yet, somehow, it managed to stay alive.

“That’s a *perchten*,” Sandra had said after scolding him years ago for his unauthorized rummaging. The mask was once used to scare away evil spirits, in the land of the shrieking mountains. But those beliefs, she insisted, had long since died. She kept the mask only as a “collector’s item,” and it was not intended for viewing by rascally children. Then she made Chris promise never show the mask to Janey, and to forget that it ever existed. Chris kept the first part of the promise to this day. But the last request was impossible to honor. From that moment on, the mask became the monster of their story, the demon with the terrible chain used to capture its victims, and relegated with all the other evil ones to the demon horde. And, once in the story, the trunk became the source of the dark power.

No doubt, to a young and active mind desperate to make sense of his father’s violent outbursts, the mask and the trunk provided much-needed answers. After all, the steamer trunk was a Russo trunk, as Chris also discovered the day of his scolding. He found out because he had asked about the yellow-and-black lizard painted on a framed square plate inside the dome top. “That’s the *lucertola del fuoco*,” Sandra had told him. “The fire lizard.” It was a reptile found in the Russos’ native town of Termini Imerese, in Sicily, and served as the family crest. Victor’s mother, Marie, had told Sandra that the Russos had royal blood. It was from Marie whom Sandra absorbed her limited Italian vocabulary, which she passed onto Chris. (After Sandra died, Marie—with Victor’s silent blessing—had been stuffed, out of her mind, into some West Coast nursing home by Ted, the only half-brother who occasionally and without success hounded Victor over the phone for contributions.) Even more, the Russo family tree was rooted to the famous castle built there. And the lizard was chosen because it had a special indestructible power: it could live in the fires of nearby Mount Etna. But Chris had since discovered and noted that the claims were just lies. First, there was no castle in Termini Imerese. The closest one was in Caccamo, to the south. And it was Norman, not Sicilian. So much for the royal bloodline. Even the story of the lizard was a lie. Mount Etna, though still a threat to all, was not nearby. It rose on the far eastern side of the island. But Imerese did have hot springs. As for the “lizard” itself—it wasn’t a lizard at all, but a poisonous salamander. How perfect. Probably chosen because the creature was indigenous and colorful. Lies, lies, lies. They helped explain how a rogue like Victor could trick a saint like Sandra into

marrying him. She even apologized to Chris in one amazing outburst for having married Victor, claiming that the man had once been “charming,” that she did not see his “other side” until it was too late. And that’s when Chris discovered his mother’s greatest fear—one that Janey liked to express: that Chris would one day become like his father. Chris held the idea to this day as a supreme insult, despite its logic. There was a pleasant irony about Termini Imerese. The town had numerous churches, one dedicated to St. Nicholas, another to St. Catherine.

So now, Chris had to deal with the smiling mask before he could resume his treasure hunt. The only thing worse than looking at the furry thing was touching it. With his distorted shadow still dancing wildly above him, Chris knelt before the chest and pinched between his right thumb and forefinger the tip of a curled horn. He did not want to risk getting bit or catching some incurable disease. With his left hand, Chris unfastened the leather strap attached to the flap of the lid’s main compartment. The flap fell across the top shelf of the chest. Chris stuffed the mask into the domed cavity and held it there, then pulled the flap up and refastened the strap. The mask was secured and covered, except for some traces of fur and the ends of those wild horns. He sighed.

The chest’s top shelf was shallow and removable. The age-stained, black-and-white photos of ancient family members were kept there in banded stacks, the Friedrichs to the left and the Russos to the right. Chris never met any of them, of course, though he had from time to time gone through the photos just out of curiosity. Of particular interest were the Austrians in festive “yodeler” costumes, as he once called them. It was especially funny to see how many of the old bearded men, particularly on the Friedrich side, looked like Saint Nick. Beach photos of short, stocky Sicilians were also amusing. Men wore swimsuits that looked like long underwear, while the women wore swimwear that looked like dresses. Many of the males had hairy shoulders. Their hairlines—just like Coach Joe’s—crept halfway down their broad foreheads. Sandra had helped identify those whom she could. That’s how Chris learned about Grandpa Sylvester. Victor’s father had died while in his forties, before Chris was born. All Chris had were photos of the dapper man. A tailor with a gimmicky horse-drawn cart used for deliveries in the crowded big city, Sylvester had married twice, and had a penchant for fedoras, and the ladies. What a surprise. As a result, Victor emerged from a tangle of half-brothers-and-sisters who cared little about each other, and who drifted apart. No surprise there either. In one classic photo sought out often to stir up vengeful and riotous laughter, the baby Victor sat in shorts, suspenders, and floppy hat atop his father’s white mare.

Chris lifted the top shelf from the chest and set it on the floor, revealing the jumble of trinkets, knick-knacks, and collectibles from each family. There was costume jewelry, tarnished silver candleholders, small gold picture frames, gold pocket watches, tiny silver crosses, holy cards, small statues—anything attached to a treasured memory. But just like last year, Chris found it difficult to find much that was appropriate for an eleven-year-old girl. It didn't really matter. Janey would gladly take anything she thought came directly from Sandra.

Settling for a simple but tarnished silver bracelet, Chris jammed the item in his sweatshirt's large pouch pocket. He replaced the shelf and reached up to close the lid. But as he did, he stared at the fire lizard, then thought of Victor sitting just above him in his comfortable chair, sipping his drink, and waiting for his daughter to die. His anger and outrage struck him hard—like a head-spinning slap across the face. Hit it, the gentle voice whispered in his ear. He punched the lizard.

The wooden plate shifted within its frame.

"Damn it," Chris said. He didn't need to give Victor another reason to boil over. Chris reached in to push the plate back into position. But when he did, it fell onto the trunk's shelf, revealing a dark leather pouch stuffed within a dusty, once-hidden compartment.

Wide-eyed, Chris hesitated, then grabbed the pouch and turned to face the roaring furnace. He loosened the leather drawstrings and stuck his right hand into the bag. Whatever was in there felt like...a pile of worms.

Chris withdrew the contents and examined them in the flickering light. A pile of worms, all right—no...leather shoestrings. But something was gleaming in all that leathery spaghetti, something small with lots of points. Chris closed his eyes for a moment to clear his vision. Then he pinched one of the shining pointy things with his left hand, pulled it from the pile, and held it up in the hellish light. It looked like a snow crystal with a hollow pentagonal center from which a branch extended from each of the five angles. The snow crystal appeared to be encrusted with diamonds. And there was another one in his right hand, though one of its branches had broken off. Both were simple pendants, no larger than a nickel. Chris inspected the pouch for the missing branch, but it wasn't there. Then he slowly rose to his feet, returning his gaze to the dazzling items.

This was serious, rich-adult-world stuff that he could imagine Katie wearing. He had never touched something so precious. What were these things doing here? And whose were they? Surely, the pendants didn't belong to the Russos. Victor would have pawned them by now, or given them to the floozy. But maybe he didn't know they were there—obviously, he didn't know! Were the pendants from the Friedrich family? If they were, Sandra had to have put them there. She was the only one from that side who

would have known about the secret compartment. But if she knew, why didn't she leave word in her will? Financial matters and family treasures did not escape her.

Chris brought his hands together, unable to remove his gaze from the pendants. He was astonished at how well preserved they were. What a wonderful gift for Janey—how amazingly wonderful! What could be more appropriate for a snowflake-gobbling angel? And to think that Victor, of all people, was indirectly responsible for this little miracle. Chris savored the delicious irony, imagining with great satisfaction the shock that would, on Christmas Day, grip Victor's face upon seeing one of these pendants around Janey's neck. But that might set him off. Would he recognize it as a family heirloom? Or would he be blind to the possibility? There was a way to find out. He had to be careful, but there was a way.

The trunk's musty smell sickened him. And the constant flickering of the furnace flames made the room shift about. Time to get out.

Chris slipped the pendants back into the pouch and carefully slid it into the sweatshirt pocket. But before he left the room, Chris scanned the shadows, then glanced down at Victor's paint cans. "*Idiota*," Chris said. With his foot, he pushed the cans away from the furnace. Then he picked up the canister of thinner and bounded up the stairs to his bedroom where he prepared to confront his father.

Shadows from the Past

Chris stood outside the den door, his right hand on the knob. Victor was still inside, listening to his goddawful opera music, and belting out those hated words. Chris hesitated. This was another room he dreaded to enter, even when he wanted to. Not even his vacuum-lugging sister dared to sneak in. It was Victor's world, a trophy-filled shrine dedicated to his supreme selfishness, through which the dark power, in the storeroom just below, flowed and condensed into the boiling black cloud in which the monster, and the others, roamed. It was also a place Victor could—as he did now—pretend not to be the miserable failure that everyone knew, but some cherished opera singer, whom everybody loved. Talk about a fantasy...

Chris pushed the door open. Victor sat in his desk chair with his back to Chris. Music blared from the speakers on either side of the entertainment center behind the desk, which Victor faced. In his right hand, which rested on the chair's overstuffed arm, Victor held a half-filled glass void of ice cubes. Apparently, he had decided to skip the formalities and drink his vodka straight, for quicker and greater effect. Standing in the center of the middle shelf among all the trophies was the confiscated candle pyramid, its fan and army of black-horse riders stilled from the lack of candlepower. But Chris could feel the dark power from below rising up...stirring the great and terrible war machine.

Victor did not move as Chris approached. He was far off in some immense opera hall or metropolitan square, dazzling the fans. Chris hesitated, then tapped him on the shoulder.

Victor snapped his head around, startled to see Chris standing there. Then his eyes narrowed as he hit the mute button on the remote in his lap. "Can't you knock when you come in?" he said, looking a little embarrassed. "What do you want, Chris?"

Chris did his best to act innocent. "You know that trunk in the storeroom?"

"You mean grandpa's?"

"It's your father's?"

“Yeah. Why? What are you doing down there? Don’t be messing with things that don’t belong to you.” Victor didn’t seem to be too alarmed, just his usual ornery self.

“I was just looking for things to give to Janey—for Christmas.”

“Janey?”

“She likes those old things in there.”

“No,” he said. “You kids need to stay out of there. That’s family stuff, not a toy box. Go find something else to give her.” He hit the mute button and sank in the chair as the opera resumed with full force.

Chris raised his voice. “I found the jewelry.”

Victor sighed and silenced the music once more. “What?”

“I found the jewelry. It was in that compartment thing with the lizard on it.”

Victor stared at him blankly. “I don’t know what in Hell you’re talking about. What compartment? What jewelry?”

Chris held out the silver bracelet.

Victor looked casually at it, then glared at Chris. “Put—it—back.” The opera resumed once more. So did the sipping, which now looked more like gulping.

Before Chris withdrew from the den, he spotted a glass ashtray on Victor’s desk. A half-crushed but barely smoked cigarette, complete with lipstick stains, rested on the grooved edge. Gritting his teeth, Chris kept his eyes on the back of Victor’s head as he quickly snatched the ashtray from the desk and stuffed it into his front pocket. Then he slipped from the den and shut the door, feeling a bit hollow, but a little joyful. The night had ended with one of those moral victories coaches liked to talk about after a hard-fought game that ended with a disappointing loss. The pendant would be retained, boxed and wrapped and hidden, and cheerfully handed out at midnight on Christmas, their traditional gift-giving time. But now, the battle for Janey’s life was on. He wondered, with some guilt, if he could endure it.

Chris dragged himself up to his room to hide the pouch with his other secrets in his closet.



Chris discovered during a quick detour to his encyclopedias that it was not uncommon for old barrel trunks to have chromolithographs or secret compartments. But the mystery of the pendants wouldn’t be easily solved, now that Victor showed no knowledge of their existence. Chris couldn’t even be sure that they belonged to the Russo family. He thought about thumbing through the stacks of old photos in the trunk to see if any of the ancients were wearing them, but he would save that for another time. Chris had to find a safer place than the closet to hide the pouch from Victor and

Janey. Chris would put the silver bracelet in the chest's secret compartment, as Victor requested, just in case his father remembered their conversation and decided to check it out. As for Janey, she would, in all probability, recover from the initial hit the chemo delivered and try to resume her normal routines for the remainder of the week. (Sandra had endured the treatments for months, nosebleeds and all, before she was finally bedridden.) And because Janey was such a neat-freak, she got into everything while lugging the vacuum and assorted dust and window rags around, or while putting away folded laundry. Not that she was clever with her favorite hiding place (her coat pockets). Still, hiding the pouch from her would be difficult.

Chris returned to his research. But his tired eyes caught a glimpse of a fuzzy light suddenly illuminating a window in Dr. Samuel's house. He blinked a few times to restore focus—then realized that it wasn't just any window. It was the casement of Katie's bedroom. Chris scooted from his bed and stood before his window. Someone was, indeed, in Katie's bedroom. But the sheer shade in her window prevented him from identifying the mysterious figure that moved about inside. Chris was certain that Katie knew by now of Janey's dire situation—just as he was certain of her sadness and concern. No doubt, she would stop by. Only the late hour prevented her from doing so tonight. Still, he fervently hoped she was alone, would see him standing here, and venture over nonetheless.

Suddenly, a snowball struck his window, knocking him from his trance. The slushy remnants slid down the spotted glass, leaving a watery trail. Chris looked out to see two dark figures standing out against the whiteness of his tiny backyard flanked on both sides by a planked fence. The intruders waved at him in a wild, obnoxious way that was all too common, as if flagging down a rescue craft. Astonished by the sight, Chris lifted the sash and stuck his head out into the cold night.

"Surprise, surprise," Larry said, a brimless fur hat with earflaps framing his fat face. "Look who just got out of prison."

"What's goin' on, me boy?" Matt said in a strange, deep voice. His torso was noticeably longer, as if he had been tortured on the rack. And though his chest was still flat, no pecs, his sharp shoulders were wider than Chris remembered, and his leather coat hung on him as if still on a very large hanger. It felt like years since Chris had seen him. Matt's coat collar was turned up, but in his typical winter fashion, so bent on being "cool," he didn't wear a hat, which was just plain stupid, not that Chris would ever say. His dark, curly hair that he once proudly displayed, with long sideburns, was gone, replaced by a buzz cut—a striking reminder of what had transpired this past year. The cold burned his scalp and ears with red.

Even though he could still hear Victor's opera music, Chris was frantic. "What are you two doing here?" he said in a forceful whisper. "You want to get us all killed?"

"Great to see you, too, Chris," Matt said. "Thanks for saying so."

"What do you want?" Chris said.

"What do you mean, 'what do we want?'" Matt said. "We gave you the signal. You opened the window. Hell, man, the game—it's back on."

"The game?" Chris said. "Are you two whacked? We can't do that anymore."

"Sure we can," Matt said. "The car's just down the street. Besides, I already found a party."

Chris could not believe his ears. Cruising Cottagewood late at night for high school and college gatherings had become one of Matt's favorite holiday traditions. He became successful at it, not only because he lived in the neighborhood, or because of his boldness and his father's stolen car, but because of those long sideburns, now gone. Larry's stocky frame and permanent five o'clock shadow didn't hurt their chances of successfully crashing parties, either. And since Chris was with them, he often passed through any resistance, despite his boyish looks and spindly physique. But that was last year—before Victor's edict.

"I can't go with you."

"Why not?"

"You know why."

"Is he home?"

"Yes," Chris said, followed by a fatalistic laugh.

"Is he drinking?"

"Does that matter?"

"Well, sure, if he passes out."

"If he catches me with you, I'm dead."

"He never caught us last year."

"I can't go."

"All right," Matt said, "we'll just stand here and whistle some Christmas songs—like Janey does—until you come down."

"Whistle?" Larry said.

Matt gave Larry a backhanded slap across the shoulder. Then the two began whistling separate tunes.

"No, stop," Chris said.

But the more he pleaded with them, the louder they whistled.

Fearing the volcano would soon erupt, Chris shut the window and dashed down the stairs. He stopped to make sure Victor's music was still

playing, then continued on to the basement where he slid the patio door open. They didn't stop their disjointed serenade until he approached. Chris realized how much Matt had grown as he had to look up at him.

"Like the new do?" Matt said, brushing the top of his head. "They're letting me grow it out a little. Really makes a difference, don't ya think?"

"You guys shouldn't have come here," Chris said.

"We weren't really gonna stop," Larry said. "Just making the old rounds. But then we saw the lights on, so we said, 'What the Hell. Let's see if we can get him to come out.' And here you are, right on cue."

Chris saw the light go out in Katie's bedroom, and he gazed past them to see if she would appear from the house.

Matt turned momentarily to stare at the Tudor, then returned his gaze to Chris. "Is that babe still living there?"

"Yeah," Chris said reluctantly. He didn't like the idea of this man-child talking about her. Never did.

Larry smirked. "The babysitter—oh, yeah."

"She was our caretaker," Chris said.

"Caretaker, right," Larry said. He giggled.

"Quite a rack, if I remember correctly," Matt said. "It's amazing what thousands of years of selective breeding can do to a collection of atoms. Got it just about right, I'd say. If only we could factor out that 'talking' thing."

"Yeah, no shit," Larry said.

But Matt seemed to sense that his crude humor did not amuse Chris, and he softened his tone. "Still got a thing for her?"

Chris didn't answer.

"Maybe she'll be at the party."

It wasn't the selling point Matt strived for. In fact, it was a horrible thought, now that Chris knew he had no chance with her. Seeing her with her boyfriend would only crush his heart again, what was left of it, and stir his anger. He didn't want to feel that way about her. Seeing Matt flirt with her would be even worse. "I gotta go inside."

"Oh, come on," Matt said. "I haven't seen you in months. We've got lots of catching up to do."

"Janey's sick."

Matt's face lit with worry. "Janey? What's wrong?"

"Blood disorder," Chris said. It sounded less threatening, like the flu.

But Matt seemed to sense its gravity. "Blood disorder? Oh, man, what's going on in that house?"

"Fucking cursed, aren't you?" Larry said.

“Hey,” Matt said, scowling at Larry, “you know where that word comes from, what it means—right? What’s in your head? His sister’s in trouble. Show some respect!” He punched Larry’s arm.

Larry’s smart-ass expression evaporated. He grabbed his arm and mouthed “ow.” And suddenly, in Chris’ whirling mind, they were back at St. Boniface, with Matt in command of their little rebellion...

The Grand Experiment

The rebellion seed germinated in what Chris described as the Grand Experiment. School administration decided to put the smartest thirty-or-so eighth graders into one class, which didn't go over well with the rest, labeled by the faculty as average or as unmotivated (*"the Buttheads," we're called, but we got even*). This new class (*"the Hotshits"—tah-dah!*) quickly developed a peculiar habit of turning up their noses and avoiding eye contact (as if we didn't exist) in the halls and elsewhere with those who did not get in, which really set nerves on edge, particularly with those whose physical prowess had put them atop the prepubescent heap.

The Experiment's premise was simple. This special, protected, and pampered class, with the world handed to them on a platter, was encouraged to question everything—anything—at any time so as not to hold back their intellectual development. No text, no teacher was infallible. Any two-year-old could appreciate its method. But it was supremely effective. "Why?" "Why not?" and "What if?" became the most common probes. These questions were fired relentlessly until the buried truth was reached, and no more questions could be asked.

At first, Chris was placed in the lower class. He had difficulty with math and reading. Numbers and letters just didn't sit still on the pages long enough for him to link together it from bit. And sometimes after reading entire paragraphs, he couldn't remember one word. But Chris quickly showed a peculiar ability in geography, art, science—any subject where he could capture, with the blink of a non-flashing eye, great gobs of information presented as a singularity, like pictures, photos, diagrams, and maps. And then, one day, when he put a book down on his desk after another failed attempt at reading individual words, Chris discovered—just by blinking—he had snapshots of an entire page of text in his brain. Then, after experimentation, he discovered that once the text picture was captured, he saw every word, and he could go back anytime at his leisure to access the information as required. (*The gift...from Sandra.*) This unique skill—the discovery of which he kept to himself—revolutionized his learning ability. Chris quickly outshone his fellow Buttheads. And he became the

first—and only—to blast his way into the otherwise impenetrable and protected world of the Hotshits, which its members viewed as a birthright. Still, most of his classmates treated Chris like a celebrity. Some called him a genius, which he hated. This crown placed upon him had thorns. The camera in his mind didn't work sometimes, especially when he willed it to. And when that happened, and he stumbled, he was accused of laziness, which brought on an enormous guilt, and only made the camera malfunction even more. Still, the school administration made him the poster boy for their Experiment, attributing his success to an unforeseen motivational factor to "get in." But others looked upon him with suspicion, contempt, and jealousy, and he withdrew even more.

That's when his life's path crossed with Matt Cavanaugh's. Suddenly, he had entered Matt's world. Matt knew of Chris' existence. And they started to interact.

At first, Chris was accepted only into the outer circle of friends Matt loosely maintained. These were the hangers-on, those who wanted to associate with Matt because he was smart and cool and charismatic and didn't give a damn about what people thought of him. But since Chris and Matt lived within a mile of each other, their paths outside the classroom crossed more and more. They rode the bus together, rode their bikes together, walked to school together. And they talked (Chris did most of the listening).

The defining moment came one day in Mr. Kane's history class. Deciding to take a break from the usual dead topics, Kane asked his class to name the "coolest" person ever. Chris was wary anytime an adult used the word "cool." Kane was trying to be one of them, which he wasn't, and never would be. He wanted the class to let down their guard, to open up, and Chris was stunned to see the ploy working. One by one, the Hotshits voiced their enthusiastic opinions: famous actors, pop singers, rock musicians, and athletes. When it was Chris' turn, he hesitated, afraid to speak his true feelings. Pop culture? Going along, repeating things you didn't know about or believe, liking things you didn't like—just to show how smart and grown-up you really were, despite appearances, and be liked and accepted? This wasn't what the Hotshits were all about. Why did they take the bait? Now a bit angry, Chris took a deep breath and blurted out his answer.

Upon hearing it, Kane's eyes lit up. "Darwin?" he howled.

The class exploded with laughter. "What's wrong with you?" a girl's voice squealed. "What a doofus," another said.

Chris sank in his desk, his face burning. So much for being honest.

"Now, now," Kane said, raising his hand to calm the class, "there's no wrong answer to this question. I said the coolest person ever. Darwin

certainly can qualify. . . somehow.” He smiled, no doubt thinking he was cool and clever, and glad to be accepted.

But the class groaned their displeasure as more insults were tossed Chris’ way.

When Kane finally gained control, he looked at Chris with a quizzical expression. “Darwin?” he said softly. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because he figured it all out—just by drawing and watching things. He wasn’t afraid to tell people. His theory was simple. Everyone could understand it. And he described it with one word.”

“Simple, huh?” Kane slowly nodded his head as someone giggled. “Okay, sound response. I can understand where you’re coming from, I suppose. But don’t think you have to appease me in any way by choosing historical figures. If I gave you another chance, what would it be?”

Chris hesitated again.

“Come on, Chris,” Kane said. “Remember, no right or wrong answer. It can be anybody—anyone you admire.”

He cleared his throat. “Galileo.”

Again the class burst with hysteria.

“Da Vinci!” Chris shouted angrily through the laughter.

“Now he’s just picking Italians!” said someone to his right. “What a goombah.”

The rest of his deity (Einstein, Wheeler, Sagan, Wigner, Kaku, Dennett, Higgs, Susskind, Smolin, Linde, Guth, Pribram, and Polkinghorne) never made it from his lips. Chris sank once more as the Hotshits’ laughter seemed endless. But as he drowned in his embarrassment, he caught a glimpse of Matt in the corner of his left eye. When Chris turned to face him, Matt just sat there nodding, and grinning. Chris saw that the king approved of his bravery in the face of overwhelming ridicule from the herd. Soon, Chris was invited to the inner circle reserved for only a select few. Chris was proud of the honor. He considered it his second major step toward adulthood.

Matt was different from all the other eighth graders. He seemed more like an adult locked in a child’s body. And he wasn’t afraid to test his boundaries. He tried smoking (*but quit*), he had lots of girlfriends (*he likes older teens*), he knew all about sex (*knows from experience, the rumors say*), and he always had a wad of cash on hand (*not daddy’s money, but no one can say where this fortune comes from*). But he was kind, too, and loyal to the inner circle. He knew when to support fragile egos and sensitive feelings. But always—always—he would speak his mind.

And that’s what started all the trouble.

The Grand Experiment worked well in nearly all the academic subjects. Traditional lesson plans, hewn to near perfection over the years, were often shot to Hell within minutes as teachers were pinned to the blackboard, struggling to explain theories, methods, statements, or procedures that were quietly accepted as fact by the other classes. Matt often led the assault.

But when it came to religious studies, the buckshot technique quickly showed its flaws. These teachings were meant to be taken as truths—no questions asked. They were meant for memorization, not debate. Questions were answered in ways that led to further questions. When those questions were answered unsatisfactorily—or not at all—frustration, confusion, even anger set in. Sometimes, these reactions were answered with discipline—extra homework, letters to parents, or detention. It was effective action on most of the Hotshits. But to the inner circle, discipline only stirred more anger and resentment and signaled clearly that something important was actually unknown or was purposely being hidden. That was unacceptable. The Grand Experiment had shown them the light. It worked. There could be no exception to the rules.

“All right,” Matt declared one day to the inner circle as they gathered on the playground, “if they don’t want to answer our questions, we’ll have to find out for ourselves.” Matt then asserted coolly and confidently that they could solve all the mysteries of life before the end of the school year.

But their journey, he warned, was not without danger. “If we want to know this stuff, we’ll have to let the beloved herd run by. We’ll no longer believe in whatever’s popular so we can be liked and loved and accepted. We’ll have to think for ourselves.” They’d become outcasts, for sure, labeled as troublemakers, which in the “herddom” was the worst fate. Being alone and isolated was a serious survival risk. “And the girls,” he lamented, “probably brand us as geeks. We might as well stamp a big ‘G’ on our foreheads.”

Matt identified the “Book” as the main target. He was not interested in the nature of what was written, who said what when, who did what to whom. “All that noise doesn’t matter,” he said. “Let’s find out who really wrote it.” The Book, he was convinced, was the key to the whole deal. All encompassing, all powerful—and hanging to reality by a thread. All they had to do was cut it, and that Book would fall into oblivion.

Religion was not the only target. The nature of evil and violence, life and death—all the things that weighed so prominently and unfairly on their hungry young minds. That’s when Chris discovered he disagreed with Matt. Because of his experience with his father, Chris detested the use of violence no matter what the reason. But Matt had another view. “Kumbaya is great when everyone’s singing,” he said. “But what if some doesn’t want

to sing? Then what are you going to do? Hit 'em over the head with the Book? There's a good use for it. Even they know that sometimes you gotta get a little beastly when someone forces you to." This view was an exception to the rules, and Chris did not approve of it. But he didn't challenge Matt, either.

In the end, the search for the Book's authors intensified the downward spiral. The information was easy to find. And in their minds, it cast serious doubts about its authority.

Matt confronted the poor nun in class one day with their findings, and he refused to back down when a "final" answer was given. "Hell, I can write inspired things, too," he said. "Why aren't my thoughts part of the Book? Seems like a lot of people just want to be God—and have all the perks that go with it. Why would I want to give anyone that kind of power?"

Matt's response drew a mix of laughter, applause, gasps, and outrage. Class was dismissed, and the rest of the school day went on as planned. But before he could step on the bus, Matt was whisked away by a number of the faculty who brought him to Mr. Bernard's office. For being "disruptive," a sentence of detention—with the threat of suspension, and after that, expulsion—was handed down. Matt kept his mouth shut for weeks. But Chris knew it was coming.

Chris sympathized with Matt during this unsettling time. Chris had, by now, finished reconstructing his own beliefs about the big questions, even while he thought he heard her begging him from the grave not to do it. The old convictions were, indeed, retired—rerouted and stored in dark, unused recesses, and nearly forgotten. New claims would be accepted only if quantified by math and/or scientific observation. Even more, because she was dead, and Chris felt much resentment and rage about the divine reasons given for her undignified and senseless demise. Something was definitely amiss with the big picture painted at St. Boniface. And the hypocrisy surrounding the Grand Experiment was appalling, and it affected Chris deeply. Matt had every right to have his questions answered correctly, and to express his feelings in his unorthodox manner.

On the fateful day, Matt, Larry, and Chris went into the church through the bell-tower door around noon to eat their sack lunches and play their usual game of tag (they had become bored with the cafeteria and playground scenes). The church was the perfect venue. Besides the banks of long wooden pews, there was the choir loft, crying room, coat-check room, and four sets of confessionals—plenty of places to hide or scamper to, to avoid being tagged.

The one big problem Chris had about the venue, besides being a church, was the rest of the church's art collection hung strategically throughout the nave—a collection Matt, fully aware of its purpose, openly despised but

secretly coveted. Once, in one of his more rebellious moods, Matt had suggest that they abscond with a few of the paintings he alarmingly deemed “most valuable” and hide them in the old grain elevator, which Chris had long suspected was the nerve center of Cavanaugh Enterprises, though he never had the guts to poke around. (It was the one place Matt insisted much too often that they not explore, even though the abandoned complex was ideal for their youthful games and escapades. “Too risky” was the odd, almost laughable reason given.) But in a rare moment of unwavering defiance, Chris and Larry quickly shot down the art-theft idea, most fearful of the legal consequences, and the angry fists. Like the vestibule collection, the nave artwork was meant to be thought-provoking, and downright intimidating. During all their irreverent cavorting, Chris felt like he was being watched.

So on that portentous day, the game progressed as normal. Each player took his turn to be “it.” Throughout the game, Chris was more than successful at avoiding detection, and he seized the moments to revel in his accomplishment. An hour later, the fun had run its course, and they exited the church quietly with crumpled lunch bags in hand to return to the school complex, certain as always that no one had seen them.

After using the restroom, Chris joined the other Hotshits in Mr. Lee’s science class. Tired from all the scampering, Chris could barely keep his eyes open during the lecture about the periodic table of the elements which failed to mention how they were part of the Dark Power. Suddenly, the classroom door opened with a flourish, and Mr. Bernard entered the room with a furious expression. He clenched a crumpled lunch bag in his right hand. Busted!

“Cavanaugh, Russo, Witosz,” he yelled, “get out here—now!”

A hush fell over the stunned classroom as Chris followed his compatriots into the hall. There, Fitz stood with his best choirboy expression.

“Are these the three you saw?” Bernard said.

“Yes, sir,” Fitz replied.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive, sir.”

Chris was sick to his stomach. He was trembling. He had never been in this much trouble before. He didn’t know if he could speak when spoken to, and he felt like crying. They had been so successful at their secret little game. Why did they have to get caught now?

“Who was carrying this?” Bernard said as he held up the lunch bag.

“I don’t know, sir. They all were carrying something. I found it in the trash can, the one outside the school entrance.”

Bernard turned his fiery gaze on them. “Whose is this?”

“I-I don’t know, sir,” Larry said. “We all had lunch bags.”

“With a can of spray paint in it?” Bernard said. He withdrew the miniature can and held it in the air.

“It’s mine, sir,” Matt said proudly. “I did it.”

Bernard’s jaw clenched. “Let me see your hands.”

Matt held his palms out. Black paint stained the base of his left fingers. Chris couldn’t believe what he was hearing and seeing.

“Why?” Bernard said with great disappointment.

“I needed to make a statement.”

“Statement?” he shouted. His voice echoed down the hall, and seemed to rattle the far windows. “You make statements in the classroom—not by spraying an insolent word on a church wall!”

Matt looked down and said nothing.

“You realize the seriousness of your actions?” Bernard said as his tone grew calmer.

“Yes, sir,” Matt said.

“Then let’s go—all three of you. Fitzgerald, you go back to class.”

“Yes, sir,” Fitz said, and he turned to walk away. But Chris knew that, inside, Fitz was kicking his heels in the air, overjoyed that he had destroyed the core of the hated inner circle with one masterful stroke.

And so the brief but tumultuous age of the Hotshits had come to a sudden end.

Because Matt admitted his guilt, Chris and Larry were not expelled. But Chris could not dodge his father’s angry fists. That night, Chris received a beating like no other, payback for not only making Victor’s life more miserable, but for all the misery—all of it, imagined or otherwise—that had preceded. Afterwards, Chris thought he’d never be allowed to leave his room again. Larry’s fate was not as brutal, but he, too, remained locked up for a long, long while. When he wasn’t, he worked in the family bakery. Janey handled the situation her own way, quickly dubbing Chris the “poopster.” And that was the end of it. But it marked the beginning of her quest to “save” him.

As for Matt, his actions forced a hasty meeting of the parish council, on which his father served. They quickly voted to expel the young rebel. And soon Matt was on his way to a life of sleeping in barracks, standing in formation, and daily inspections.

When Chris returned to class the following week, the Grand Experiment was over, and the Hotshits had been disbanded, scattered among the rest of the eighth grade classes. As Matt had warned, Chris and Larry were shunned by their classmates, and struggled through the rest of the year under the suspicious eyes of the faculty, who piled on impossible amounts of homework to keep their minds focused. Neither he nor Larry attended the

graduation ceremony. They weren't invited. Instead, they received their certificates in the mail.



"I was wrong to be such a follower," Chris blurted as they stood in the backyard snow.

"Say what?" Larry said, his face askew. "What in Hell are you—"

"I shouldn't have been a herd runner. I hate that."

"I never thought you were," Matt replied as if he had been watching the movie that had just played in Chris' mind. "Okay, maybe at first. But not later."

"You shouldn't have been expelled."

"Yeah, well, small matter of opinion. Amazing how paint gets on your fingers—damn cheap spray cans. Not very smart to dump it in the school trash. But I wanted out—really." He paused to smile painfully. "I wouldn't have lasted—you know that. They were out to get me. Besides, it was getting too crazy there."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm in a better place. Lots of loony spoiled jerks like me with money to burn. The business opportunities are endless."

But Chris didn't believe for a moment that Matt was happy about his predicament. "Can you tell me one thing?"

"What's that?" Matt said.

"Why did you do it?"

He shrugged. "All things considered, in the heat of the moment, just seemed like the right thing to do."

The spotlights behind Chris burst to life. He whirled around and saw Victor pulling open the glass door, fast-food cup in hand. He had his bomber jacket on. Chris wasn't surprised that he had been caught, that he would have a face-off with Victor. But now he realized the magnitude of his miscalculation. Not now, not here, in front of the guys—in front of her!

"Uh-oh," Larry said, looking away as Victor approached slowly, arms extended outward for balance, as if he were walking a line.

Matt stood tall, refusing to move, as if ready to absorb an impact.

"Well, well, *well*, well, well," Victor said before taking a noisy sip from his cup. "If it isn't the three mus-ke-teers, back together a-gain. What a delight."

Victor was completely drunk by now. His eyes were like slits, and he spoke slowly and deliberately, trying not to slur his words. But that never worked. It was the jovial Victor—the one that everyone who didn't know him well seemed to like. The one who was an expert at drunk driving, and who—despite the countless chances—had never been arrested. *Oh, your father is so funny! What a riot. Why can't you be more like him?*

Victor squinted in the bright light at Matt. Then a laugh erupted from his belly as he pointed his cup's straw at Matt's head. "Got you by the short hairs, don't they, kid?"

"Yes, sir," Matt said. He was solemn but respectful.

Victor's laugh stopped abruptly. He stood tall and wide-eyed, his mouth puckered as if he were trying to whistle. "Oh, yes, sir—yes, sir," he said. He gave Matt a few mock salutes with his left hand. Then the wide-mouthed belly laugh returned.

Suddenly, Victor stopped laughing. "Oh," he said, as if an idea popped in his brain, "where's my man-ners?" He shoved the cup into Matt's face.

Matt flinched as the tip of the straw poked his nose.

"Have a drink, kid," Victor said. "You look like you could use one."

"No, thanks," Matt said. He carefully pushed the cup away with his right hand. "I'm drivin'."

Victor's tongue followed the swirling straw around as he tried to put it into his mouth. Then he took a long sip. "You will," he said, after gulping. "Someday, you'll all be like me. You just wait."

"I sure as Hell hope not," Matt said. "I think I'd have to shoot myself. Maybe you, too."

"Oh-ho-ho!" Victor replied. His jovial expression began to falter. "Getting all high and my-tee, are we?"

In a flash, Victor dropped his cup, whirled around, and slapped Chris' face, as if throwing a sidearm pitch. The force of the blow—and its suddenness—knocked Chris to the ground. Now on his hands and knees—not sure where he was, the left side of his face on fire—Chris touched his swollen upper lip and tasted blood. Just like that, the monster had reappeared.

Matt stepped forward, fists clenched. But Victor spun back up to tower over him, and Matt froze. Larry was bug-eyed and paralyzed.

"You want some of that, punk?" Victor said in a low growl. His arms were at his side, but flexed, and hands spread wide, ready to strike again.

Chris saw that Matt, though burning, wanted no part of this raging, drunk, athletic man who fought other men of greater stature in bars, and, because of that famous anger that knew no bounds, often won.

When Victor seemed certain that he had sufficiently intimidated Matt and Larry, he grabbed Chris by the jacket collar and threw him toward the house. "Party's over. Get inside." Even though intoxicated, Victor was careful not to roar. Experience told him that if he did, neighbors—or the police or social workers—might descend on him.

With his heart racing, Chris scrambled to his feet. He ran through the opened patio door and turned to see Victor right behind him. As if he had planned it, Victor grabbed the telescope and heaved it at Chris. Chris ducked

to the side as the telescope and its tripod flew past and landed hard on the cement floor. Glass shattered and scattered like marbles as the telescope raked the concrete, then crashed in a loud heap against the storage room wall.

“Didn’t I tell you not to talk to those two?” Victor bellowed. He slammed the patio door shut. “Didn’t I?” With eyes afire, Victor rushed toward Chris.

Chris dodged his father’s lunge, then sprinted to the left before bolting up the steps to the foyer. Slamming the door, Chris whirled around, uncertain what to do or where to go, refusing to bring the battle up to the second floor. He could hear Victor’s deliberate steps pounding up the stairs. This was it. The storm clouds that had been gathering all this time had finally built into a tempest. All of the rage for all of Chris’ misdeeds—the forbidden friends, the football tryout, the church—was about to hit in one thunderous strike. Once again, Chris feared for his life.

Instinctively, Chris backed into the living room and slowly made his way to the glowing tree. The basement door burst open, then Victor appeared, horns growing, red eyes flaming, the roller chain dangling from his right cloven hand.

“Don’t you dare run away from me, you little shit!” he screamed as he slowly crossed the foyer floor. “Who in Hell do you think you are, huh? This is my house. I make the rules. And you—you’re gonna obey them!” He stopped at the step and wrapped the chain tighter around his hand, making sure he had a firm grip. But the chain cut his fingers so they oozed, and added to the growing horror. Then he stepped down into the living room.

“Go away!” Chris shouted, nearly in tears. He backed around the tree so that it partially shielded him. “Leave us alone!”

But Victor kept on coming. “You think this stupid thing’s gonna save you?” Victor said. He thrust his left hand into the tree, gripped its pole center, then threw the tree to the side. Its lights flickered, then went out, casting the room into darkness. The kugels bounced and cracked on the floor while other ornaments shattered as the tree rolled in agony.

“Go away!” Chris shouted into the howling winds. “Go back to your chamber where you belong!”

Victor’s ominous shadow raised the chain high in the air as the boiling black clouds flashed and thundered.

Chris covered his face with his arms.

“No-o-o-o!” Janey’s voice shrieked. “Stop it!”

At once, the raging storm died. All Chris could hear was a few of the fallen kugels rolling across the hardwood floor. The tree flicked back on, filling the room with its saving glow. Chris looked past Victor to see Janey standing in her heart pajamas at the base of the foyer steps. Even Victor

turned to look at her. Janey was staring at the fallen tree and the broken kugels. And she was sobbing. Suddenly, blood trickled from her nose and across her lips.

“Janey,” Chris said in a subdued but tense voice, careful not to frighten her. He walked quickly to her side.

“Why are you doing this?” Janey screamed at Victor in a guttural tone that he had not heard in years. “Why? What did we ever do to you?” Then she broke down, weeping.

Chris snatched Janey by the hand and refused to look at Victor. “Come on, Janey.” He led her to the bathroom next to Victor’s den and closed the door. He spun the roll of toilet paper, ripped the dangling sheets away, then balled them up and began dabbing her nose.

“The kugels,” Janey said, her sobbing now down to a whimper, “he destroyed them.”

“No, he didn’t—maybe just a few,” Chris said as calmly as he could, tossing the bloodied toilet paper into the wastebasket before grabbing another bundle. “Here, tip your head back.”

She took the ball of paper in her hand. “What about my music box?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he said, guiding her hand up to her nose. She was still bleeding. “It’s strong—like you. I’ve never met anyone so brave. I’ll get everything cleaned up and put back in place. Don’t you worry.”

Janey held the toilet paper to her nose, and she seemed to calm a bit. But then her sad eyes grew alarmed. “Did he hurt you?” she said as she withdrew her hand.

Chris ran his tongue across his swollen upper lip. “I’ll be okay. It’s nothing.”

She began sobbing.

“Come on, Janey,” he said, helping to tip her head back, “we gotta stop the bleeding. I’m not ready to give you your Christmas present. We’ll drown in here.”

Janey shook her head and dabbed the trickling blood.

After a while, and a few more wads of toilet paper, the nose bleeding subsided. So did her sadness, slowly replaced by an ever-growing determination that blazed in her narrow eyes. Chris grit his teeth and smiled. “That’s what I want to see, huh? Yeah, stronger by the second.” Now it was time to face Victor once more—or whatever awaited them out there. “Ready?” he said to her.

She nodded. He did to. They both smiled. Then they put on their warrior masks.

Chris gripped the door handle. “Be strong for me, no matter what you see or hear. We don’t want to let him win. Remember, just you and me. And don’t stop thinking it.”

Chris pulled the door open and they stepped hand in hand into the foyer. With slumped shoulders, Victor stood in the living room staring down at the massacre, chain still clenched in his right fist. He looked confused, as if he had been sleepwalking and just woke up to this terrible sight. Then he slowly raised his head. Chris and Janey met his confused gaze with all the resolve they could muster.

“This isn’t my fault—none of it,” he muttered. He rolled the chain into a ball. “I didn’t want you, neither one of you. All this bullshit—the house, that ridic-u-lous tree, all the crappy artwork—this was her idea, not mine.”

So now it was out: the world, according to Victor. Finally, Chris had the official answer. But they were the cruelest words he had ever heard.

Even Victor seemed a little stunned by his acid statements, but he quickly regrouped for one last horrible stab. “One of these days, I swear, I’m gonna burn this place to the ground. And you’re never gon-na see me again.”

Chris should have felt a spark of joy to think of Victor leaving them. Instead, Chris felt...hurt, and painfully so. It was amazing how a man who had used brute force most of their lives to harm them—a man for whom they had no love at all—could end up ripping their hearts out with such candid proclamations. Chris also felt a familiar alarm. It wasn’t the first time their cash-strapped father had threatened to burn down the house. He had done it many times, even when Sandra was alive. In the aftermath of his tirades, she would try to reassure them that it was the alcohol talking, but Chris never fully believed her. And so Chris made sure he understood all the methods that such a desperate man would use.

So now they stood silently and in fear, watching his every move as he drifted past them like the demonic specter that he was, wondering if would spew more venom. Victor stepped into the foyer and mindlessly set the balled and bloody chain on the oval table next to the grandfather clock. Then he started down the hall. They didn’t budge until they heard his den door close tightly. He would stay there the rest of the night, passed out in his chair. If only they could wall him up in there, forever. Chris swallowed hard, then looked down at Janey.

“Why doesn’t he want us?” she said in a small voice.

Chris knew the answer. He had stated it many times before. But the hurt and despair in her expression were too much for him to bear, and he quickly looked away.

Chris led Janey to the stairs. They started up, but Janey stopped on the second step.

She looked up at him with red, weary eyes. “I can’t,” she said.

Chris scooped her up and carried her to the landing, and finally to her bedroom where he gently laid her in bed. “Try to get some rest,” he said. He pulled the comforter to her chest.

Janey closed her eyes and kept them closed as she whispered her prayers. Neither of them could feign a smile. And the thought of uttering “good night” or “pleasant dreams” was laughable. They had been emotionally gutted. All that remained was a hollow shell—and the renewed fear for their future.

Chris closed her door, descended the stairs, and returned to the living room to assess the damage and try, as Sandra had taught him, to clean up, restore order, and hide the shame. (That was the strangest part. Despite all the hate he felt towards Victor, there was an overriding sense to protect honor and reputation—not Victor’s, but his. After all, Victor was his father. To have a monster filling that vital role was the greatest embarrassment of them all.) Chris hoped most of the kugels had survived the fall. Bits of red and blue glass were scattered everywhere, sparkling like jewels on the floor, while some of the ornaments had survived but slid or rolled away to all parts of the room. He wouldn’t know for sure until the tree was back in place. As for Janey’s angel, that was another matter. If it hadn’t survived, if it was beyond repair, Chris hated to think of what that news would do to her.

The terror wasn’t going to end, really. It would go away for a time, here and there, but it was a permanent fact—on and on and on for all eternity. He still wasn’t sure if the conflagration would ever transpire. Victor often vowed outrageous acts when drunk, things that he would like to do to clean his slate and start over. But he never had the guts to pull them off. Now Chris contemplated running away—the both of them, anywhere, just so they could finally be rid of his father. Strangely, Katie popped into his thoughts, but only briefly, as her vision was quickly beaten back by all his troubles. It was a rare time her image brought him no pleasure or comfort.

Chris went to the window and knelt down to secure the light plug that had loosened from the outlet when the tree had been thrown to the floor. Then he walked around the tree’s corpse and pushed the topper into place. Slowly he lifted the tree upright. Glass fragments jingled like tiny bells as they fell with whole ornaments to the floor. He retrieved the scattered ornaments, doing his best to properly place them on the tree. Janey’s music box still beneath the tree, and undamaged.

Once he rehung all the whole ornaments, Chris grabbed the dustpan from the foyer closet and swept up the shattered remains of the ornaments that did not survive. He dumped them into a grocery store bag from the recycled supply kept in the closet. Then he brought the bag upstairs and checked on Janey before he flopped onto his bed. He would add the remains

to the coffee can tomorrow. Tonight, he just wanted to forget everything that had happened, that this world even existed. If only he could remove his aching brain and place it in a jar...

Chris rolled over to turn off the light. But before he did, he gazed at the book, still in the trash can. He hesitated, recalling its strange comforts and the approach of midnight, then retrieved it. Feeling its numbing Power, he clutched it to his chest. Now growing drowsy, slipping in and out of insane dreams, Chris—in a moment of utter exhaustion and defeat—silently hoped that he would not wake in the morning.

PART THREE



The Dream World

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