

MORTAL COILS

OTHER BOOKS BY ERIC NYLUND

Pawn's Dream
A Game of Universe
Dry Water
Signal to Noise
A Signal Shattered

Halo® Novels
Halo®: Fall of Reach
Halo®: First Strike
Halo®: Ghosts of Onyx

MORTAL COILS

ERIC NYLUND



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

MORTAL COILS

Copyright © 2009 by Eric Nylund
All rights reserved.

Reader's Guide © 2009 by Eric Nylund

A Tor Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

Tor[®] is a registered trademark of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nylund, Eric S.

Mortal coils / Eric Nylund.—1st ed.

p. cm.

“A Tom Doherty Associates book.”

ISBN-13: 978-0-7653-1797-1 (trade pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-7653-1797-4 (trade pbk.)

1. Twins—Fiction. 2. Teenagers—Fiction. 3. California, Northern—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3564.Y55M67 2009

813'.54—dc22

2008038363

First Edition: February 2009

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For everyone with family . . .
by blood, marriage, or circumstance*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Syne, writers can be hermits, bears in caves that growl at all outsiders. Who but another writer to draw me out and keep me sane and civilized with your love? One could not ask for a better soul mate.

Kai, my marvelous son, you were three and four years old when I wrote this, and you helped breathe life into fictional son and father. Daddy promises he's not the Prince of Darkness.

My sister, my mother and father . . . and so many more whom I call "family," you have all been inspirational and close to my heart at all times.

Thanks to my early readers, Elisabeth Devos and Jenny Gaynor, who helped me refocus my attention on the twins.

For my final readers, John Sutherland and Alexis Ortega, a debt of gratitude for your kind words and enthusiasm.

To Tom Doherty and Richard Curtis, my appreciation for your patience, guidance, and support.

Special thanks to Eric Raab. Your editorial acumen and friendship have made all the difference.

And to all my readers, a huge "thank you," especially those that have dropped me a note or e-mail over the years.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Due to the controversial nature of all Post Family stories, and recent revelations that some popular “nonfiction” titles are slightly less than accurate, the editorial board at TOR Books has at this time decided to classify *Mortal Coils* as “fiction.” We have no interest in entering the debate over the authenticity of Post Family stories in the popular press.

Footnotes to pertinent resources have, however, been added throughout, so enthusiasts and scholars of modern mythology may follow up with their own research and draw their own conclusions to what is the most exciting contemporary legend of our time.

ERIC RAAB
Editor, TOR Books
New York

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life,
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despis'd love. . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Hamlet ACT 3, SCENE 1

SECTION



BIRTHDAY

TWO LITTLE NOBODIES

Eliot Post and his sister, Fiona, would be fifteen tomorrow and nothing interesting had ever happened to them. They lived with their grandmother and great-grandmother, who, with their iron-fist-in-velvet-glove ways, held them captive from anything exciting.

Eliot slid a plastic milk crate to his dresser and stepped up to see into the mirror. He frowned at his mop of unruly black hair; the bowl cut had grown shaggy. At least it covered his ears, which stuck out. He looked like a dork.

He smoothed his fingers through the mess and it fell into place . . . then the cowlicks sprang up.

If only he had some hair gel. There was, however, a rule banning brand-name shampoo, soap, and other “luxury” items. His great-grandmother concocted homemade versions instead. They cleaned (occasionally stripping off the first layer of skin) but left something to be desired in the fashion department.

Eliot glanced at the pages taped to the back of his bedroom door: Grandmother’s 106 rules that governed every breath he took. The lack of hair gel was covered by RULE 89.

RULE 89: No extravagant household products—including, but not limited to, store-bought soaps, shampoos, paper towels, and other unnecessary disposable goods.

Fortunately this did not include toilet paper.

The clock on his dresser made a rusty “ping.” It was ten o’clock. The

lunch shift started at Ringo's All American Pizza Palace in forty minutes. He suppressed a shudder, already tasting the sweet dough and pepperoni grease that would permeate his skin.

Eliot grabbed his homework off his desk. He flexed his hand, working free the stiffness from writing all night. It'd been worth it. He was proud of his report on the War of 1812. Grandmother would have to give him an A.

His thoughts of the Chesapeake campaign and "The Star-Spangled Banner" vanished as a car drove past outside. Three stories on the street below, its radio thumped and bumped into Eliot's room.

The music washed through him, swept aside all thoughts of homework, pizza, rules, and for one moment he was somewhere else: a hero on the high seas, cannons blasting, and wind screaming through the sails.

The car passed and the music faded.

Eliot would have done anything for a radio of his own. "Music is a distraction," Grandmother had told him over and over. There was, naturally, a rule for it, too.

RULE 34: No music, including the playing of any instruments (actual or improvised), singing, humming, electronically or by any means producing or reproducing a rhythmic melodic form.

It sucked. All of Grandmother's rules did. He never got to do anything he wanted . . . except, of course, read.

Three entire walls of his room were not walls at all, but floor-to-ceiling bookshelves installed sometime in the Precambrian era by Great-Grandmother.

Two thousand fifty-nine volumes lined his tiny bedroom: red spines, gray cloth covers, faded paper jackets, and gleaming gold letters, all exuding a scent of moldering paper and well-worn leather, the entirety a solid mass of age and authority.¹

Eliot ran a hand over their vertebrae—Jane Austen . . . Plato . . . Walt Whitman. He loved his books. How many times had he escaped to differ-

1. Excavation of what experts believe was the Oakwood Apartments building (the alleged Post Family residence) revealed the remains of more than one hundred thousand books on all floors: leather bindings, partial pages, literally tons of parchment ash, and a handful of intact volumes. These fueled the intense blaze that eventually caused the entire town of Del Sombra to burn to the ground. *Gods of the First and Twenty-first Century, Volume 11: The Post Family Mythology*, 8th ed. (Zypheron Press Ltd.).

ent countries, centuries long past, with colorful characters as his companions?

He just wished *his* life could be as interesting.

Eliot went to open his bedroom door, but halted before the pages of Grandmother's rules. He glared at them, knowing the biggest rule of all was unwritten. RULE 0: *No escaping the rules.*

He sighed, twisted the doorknob, and pushed open his door.

Light spilled into the darkened corridor. At the same instant a second rectangle of light appeared as his sister's door opened. Fiona wore a green gingham dress, a tattered suede belt, and sandals that laced up her calves.

People said they looked alike, but she was five foot five inches, while Eliot was still only five foot three inches. For being his *twin* sister, she didn't really look anything like him. Her posture was wet-noodle limp, hair in her eyes except when it wasn't pulled into a tail of frizz, and she chewed on her nails.

She stepped into the hallway at the exact same second as Eliot. She was always pretending this synchronicity thing to annoy him. The myth was that twins always thought the same thing, mirrored each other's motions—were practically the same person.

She must have been waiting at her door, listening for his to open. Well, he wasn't buying it.

"You look sick," Fiona said, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. "*Naegleria fowleri*?"

"Haven't been swimming," he replied. "So maybe you're the one with brain-eating amoebas."

He'd read *Rare Incurable Parasites*, volume 3, as well.

This was their favorite game: vocabulary insult.

"Lochsmere," he said, and eyed her contemptuously.

Her brow scrunched in concentration.

That was a tough one—a character from the thirteenth-century *Twixtbury Chronicles* by Vanden Du Bur. Lochsmere was a plague-ridden dwarf, evil and puppy-drowning vile.

The *Twixtbury* text lay on the top shelf of the hallway bookcase, covered in a layer of dust. No way she had read it.

Fiona caught his look, followed it, and smiled.

"You have me confused for noble G'meetello," she said, "master of Lochsmere . . . who is obviously you."

So she had read it. Okay. The score was still nothing to nothing.

Fiona half-closed her eyes and murmured, "Sometimes, little brother, I think your wit so tantalizing it would be better for everyone if you were at Tristan da Cunha."

Tristan da Cunha? He didn't know that one.

"No fair using foreign words."

Fiona had a talent for languages, while he did not. They had a pact, though: no foreign words from her and no made-up words from him in their games of vocabulary insult. Eliot had a particular talent for finding colorful but nonsensical terms that had no place in *any* dictionary.

"It's not foreign," she said, beaming with satisfaction.

He believed her. They never lied in vocabulary insult.

Eliot tried to puzzle it out. Tristan . . . like the knight of legend? Maybe a castle? Fiona was forever reading travel journals. That had to be it.

"Yes," he said, adopting his best fake ironic air. "Behind its walls I might be safe from seeing your face."

Fiona blinked. "A good guess, but absolutely wrong. Tristan da Cunha is an island in the South Atlantic, thirteen hundred miles from the nearest inhabited land. Population two hundred eighty. I believe their official currency is the potato."

Eliot deflated. "Great, you win," he muttered. "No big deal. I let you. Happy early birthday."

"You've never let anyone win anything." She gave a short laugh. "Happy birthday to you, too."

"Come on." Eliot brushed past her.

She caught up to him and squeezed by. Thousands more volumes crowded the hallway on either side, from hardwood floors to water-stained plaster ceiling.

They emerged in the dining room and squinted as their eyes adjusted to the light. A picture window showed the brick building across the street and a faint band of sky bisected by high-tension power wires, only partially obscured by the overflowing bookcases on all sides.

Great-Grandma Cecilia sat at the dining table writing letters to her many cousins. Her paper-thin skin was a web of wrinkles. She wore a brown dress that buttoned all the way up her throat and looked as if she could have stepped out of a tin daguerreotype.

Cecilia beckoned to them and hugged Fiona, then Eliot, adding a dry kiss for good measure.

He returned her trembling embrace, but oh so gingerly, because he was

afraid he'd break her. A hundred and four years old was nothing to fool with.

Eliot loved his great-grandmother. She always had time to listen to him, no matter what she was doing. She never gave him advice or orders. She was just *there* for him.

"Good morning, my darlings," she whispered. Her voice was the rustle of autumn leaves.

"Morning Cee," Eliot and Fiona said together.

Eliot shot his sister a look. She was doing it again: that synchronicity thing. Just to get to him.

Cecilia patted his hand. "Yesterday's homework." She nodded to the papers on the edge of the table.

Fiona was a little closer and grabbed them before Eliot. She frowned, peeling off the top sheets, and passed them to him. "Yours," she murmured, then focused on the rest of the pages.

Eliot took them, annoyed that she had looked at his grade before he could.

A large C+ had been scratched at the top of last week's essay on the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. Next to it was *Fine thesis. Flawed execution. Writing closer to aboriginal than English.*

Eliot winced. He had tried *so* hard. He had all the ideas in his head, but when he put them onto paper, everything got tangled.

He glanced at Fiona; her olive complexion had paled. He stepped closer and spotted the large C- on her page.

"My ideas were 'amateurish,'" she whispered.

"It's okay," Eliot said. "We'll help each other rewrite them tonight."

Fiona nodded. She took bad grades harder than Eliot, as if she had something to prove to Grandmother. Eliot had given up trying to live up to her expectations. Nothing was ever good enough. Sometimes he just wished that she'd leave them alone.

"Alone or together," said Grandmother, "I expect those rewritten tonight along with your new assignment."

Eliot jumped and turned.

Grandmother stood behind them in the hallway, arms folded over her chest, one hand holding two crisply typed pages.

"Good morning, Grandmother," Eliot said.

It was *Grandmother* always. It was never *Audrey* or *Gram*, or any other pet name like they used with Cecilia. Not that it was forbidden, but *Grandmother*

was the only thing they ever thought to call her. It was the only title that carried the authority her presence demanded.

Grandmother's thin body stood with perfect posture and towered over them at an even six feet. Her silver hair was shorn with military precision, and her olive complexion had not a single wrinkle, even though she was sixty-two years old. She wore a plaid flannel shirt buttoned all the way to the top, jeans, and steel-toed boots. Her expression, as usual, was one of ironic inscrutability.

She handed them the pages: tonight's homework, which consisted of seven geometric proofs and a new essay on Isaac Newton's personal life.

Eliot flexed his hand and wondered how short he could make this new essay and still get a passing grade. A passing grade according to Grandmother was an A-. She always told them that "excellence is the least that is expected of you" and made them rewrite subpar papers until they were good enough.

"They've had breakfast?" Grandmother asked Cecilia.

"At eight thirty." Cecilia gathered her letters and envelopes into a neat stack. "Oatmeal, juice, one hard-boiled egg."

Boiling water was the upper limit of Cecilia's cooking ability. Eliot always offered to help, but she never let him.

Grandmother plucked up their turned-in homework, and her gray eyes scanned the first lines noncommittally. "They should go," she said. "Being late for work will not do."

"Couldn't . . ." Cecilia's weathered hand curled around her throat. "I mean, tomorrow are their birthdays. Must they do homework the night before—"

Grandmother shot Cecilia a look that guillotined her words midsentence.

Cecilia looked down at her letters. "No, of course not," she whispered. "Silly of me."

Not even Cecilia could get Grandmother to bend a rule. Eliot loved her for trying, though.

Grandmother turned to Eliot and Fiona and tapped her wristwatch. "Ticktock," she said, and leaned closer.

Fiona gave her a polite kiss on her cheek. Eliot did, too, but it was just a formality, part of the morning's scheduled activities.

Grandmother gave him the slightest hug.

Eliot knew she loved him—at least, that's what Cecilia always said. He

wished her “love” would be something other than rules and restrictions, though. Just once he wished she’d cancel homework and take them all out for a movie. Wasn’t that “love,” too?

“Lunch is on the table by the door,” Cecilia told them. “Oh, I didn’t get to the store yesterday. . . .”

Eliot and Fiona glanced at one another, understanding.

Fiona bolted for the front door first and Eliot followed—but too late. She grabbed the larger paper bag off the table, the one Cecilia had slipped the last apple into, and ran out the door.

Eliot reluctantly grabbed the remaining bag, knowing it only contained a dry tuna-fish sandwich on rye.

“Have a good day, my darlings,” Cecilia called after them, smiled, and waved.

Grandmother wordlessly turned away.

“Thanks, Cee,” Eliot whispered.

He ran after Fiona, down the hall, past the elevator, and to the stairs. She was always trying to outrace him—everything was a competition with Fiona.

Eliot wasn’t about to let her win without a fight. By the time he hit the upper landing, though, Fiona was half a floor ahead of him, her longer legs carrying her farther, faster.

He chased her down the three flights, round and round, Eliot now only a few feet behind—until they burst through the steel security door onto the street.

It was a sunny day in Del Sombra, and they rested a moment in the narrowing shadow of the brick façade of their apartment building.

On Midway Avenue peach trees sat in planters. Their branches swayed in the warm breeze and dropped not-quite-ripe fruit on the road to be spattered by the tourists racing to Sonoma County.

“I won,” Fiona said, breathing heavily. “Twice. In one day.” She shook her paper-bag lunch. “Extra apple, too. You need to be faster, *Bradypus*.”

Bradypus was the genus name for the three-toed sloth, one of the slowest mammals in the world.

Eliot’s mood darkened, but he didn’t let her bait him into another round of vocabulary insult; instead he just shot her a glare.

He unclenched his paper-bag lunch, still in a tight grip from their sprint. A metallic clink came from inside. Eliot unrolled and then peered into the bag. At the bottom were two quarters. That was Cee, trying to make things even between him and his sister.

Eliot plucked them out and held them up to the sunlight. They gleamed like liquid mercury.

Fiona grabbed for them—but this time he was quicker.

“Ha!” he said, snapping them securely into his fist.

He’d use them to buy carrot juice from the health-food store on his break. Better than the flat soda or tap water they got at Ringo’s. He dropped them back into the bag.

Fiona shrugged as if those quarters didn’t mean anything to her, and she briskly started to walk down the sidewalk.

Eliot knew her; it mattered.

He caught up to her. “You think anything’s going to happen tomorrow?”

“Like what?” Fiona asked. “New rules?”

His stride faltered. It was a distinct possibility. Grandmother’s list of rules grew longer every year. The latest entry was just five weeks ago.

RULE 106: No dating—single, double, dutch, chaperoned or not, or otherwise.

As if *that* were going to happen in his lifetime. Maybe it was for Fiona. The guys at work sometimes talked to her.

“I just thought . . .,” Eliot said, running to catch up to his sister. “I don’t know. Like school—maybe we’ll go to a real school. With other kids. Wouldn’t that be better than Grandmother’s assignments every night?”

Fiona said nothing, her silence voicing her opinion.

Other kids were sometimes a problem for him and his sister. While Eliot knew the capital of Angola (Luanda), the number of genes in the earthworm, *Caenorhabditis elegans* (about nineteen thousand), ask him to make small talk with a girl and his IQ dropped thirty points.

“Yeah,” he said, “maybe not such a great idea.”

But something new *had* to happen. Almost fifteen years old. You couldn’t live your entire life just doing the same thing every day: Ringo’s, homework, reading, chores, sleeping.

Was this what it was going to be like until he was eighteen? Would Grandmother keep them home until twenty-one? Forty? Until they were as old as Cee?

Fiona brushed back her hair, hooking it over her ear. “I want to travel,” she said in a faraway voice. “Go to Athens or Tibet . . . actually see at least one of the places we’ve read about.”

His sister had the right idea. He turned the same fantasy over in his head every day: running far away. Where would they go? And more important, how could they ever defy Grandmother?

He and Fiona might as well have been corked inside a bottle, sailing nowhere on a tiny balsa-wood ship.

“Could be worse.” Fiona nodded ahead at the entrance to an alley. “We could be like your friend there.”

From the shadows in the alley, a pair of worn sneakers missing their laces protruded onto the sidewalk. Holes in their soles revealed bare feet inside.

“He’s not my friend,” Eliot muttered. “He’s just some guy.”

Fiona increased her pace as they neared the shoes.

The sneakers were attached to tattered jeans and a tangle of gray rags that might once have been a trench coat.

They saw this old man every day on their way to work. Sometimes he huddled on different corners or like today sat in the shadows. And while his location changed . . . his smell never did: a combination of sardines, body odor, and burnt matches.

Eliot slowed to a halt.

The old man’s face squinted up at him, his leathery skin contorting into a mass of deep laugh lines and white scars. His lips parted into a greasy smile; he leaned forward and held out an Angels’ baseball cap. A piece of cardboard jammed into the brim had the word *VET* printed on it.

Eliot held up his hand. “Sorry I don’t . . .”

His words trailed off as he saw a kidney-shaped object tucked behind the man. A violin.

Eliot could almost feel the waves of sound resonating off it, almost taste the notes, sweet and wavering, oscillating through his skull. He wanted to touch it—even though he’d never played any instrument before.

The old man followed Eliot’s stare, and his smile brightened, revealing yellowed teeth thick with saliva.

He pulled the violin into his lap and ran his thumb over the chipped fingerboard . . . for all the good it would do. All the strings were missing.

The music in Eliot’s head screeched to a halt.

He would have given anything to hear him play.

The man’s smile vanished and he set his cap over the violin.

Eliot bit his upper lip, unrolled his lunch bag, and fished out the two quarters.

Fiona stopped, watching him. She set her hands on her hips and shook her head.

Eliot didn't care what his sister thought; the money was his to spend any way he wanted.

"You should buy a few strings," Eliot whispered to the old man. "I bet you could make more money if you played a little." He dropped the quarters into the cap.

The man grasped the coins, rubbed them together, gazed lovingly at the violin . . . and then back up to Eliot. He said nothing, but his dull blue eyes brimmed with tears.



CHOCOLATE HEART

Fiona couldn't believe her brother. She watched him drop his quarters in the bum's baseball cap. Only ten minutes older than Eliot, she sometimes felt it might as well be ten years. How could he be such a little boy?

She stalked back to extricate him, before he gave his lunch away, too.

The old man looked from Eliot to her and his gaze hardened.

He glanced her over. It wasn't the way boys sometimes looked at her. "Elevator eyes" she had heard other girls call it. This was more as if he could see past her skin, right down to her bones.

She could smell him now, too: sardines, a month of curdled body odor, and smoke.

The stench aside, there was a magnetic repulsion, too. She just wanted to get as far away from the old man as she could. He gave her the creeps.

She grabbed Eliot's hand, which was uncharacteristically ice-cold.

"Come on," she whispered. "We're going to be late." She jerked him toward her.

"Yeah," he said, still looking back at the old man.

They fell into their hurry-up stride.

"You might as well have tossed your money down the storm drain," she said. "That guy can't even play. Probably found that violin in the trash."

"Sure he can play," Eliot muttered, and rubbed his hand. "I bet he's good, too."

Eliot was too nice sometimes, and people like that bum took advantage of him. For a moment she considered turning around and getting his money

back. But maybe it would be better if Eliot learned that not everyone operated by Grandmother's 106 rules. At fifty cents, it would be a lesson learned cheaply.

He had that dopey look on his face whenever he talked about music. Fiona knew better than to lecture Eliot about RULE 34—you might as well talk to a trash can about aesthetics, or a brick wall about aerodynamics.

She wondered what life would be like without having to look after him. Eliot was always trying to find ways around the rules, and getting them *both* into trouble.

Like it or not, though, he was her brother—like a third, mutated arm growing from the middle of her chest—he was annoying, but she couldn't quite bring herself to cut him off.

"Cee told me you were adopted," she told him. "I saw the birth certificate. It said, 'Eliot Post. *Sarcoptes scabiei*.'"

This was a microscopic mite that caused scabies, whose symptoms included pimplelike irritations and intense itching.

Eliot scratched his head. "Got to get your nose out of the medical books. I've read them all, too. Are you losing your touch? A dose maybe of *Mycobacterium leprae*?"

That was the strain of bacteria, also called Hansen's bacillus, that caused leprosy. Nice double entendre.

They rounded the corner of Midway and Vine. Across the street was Sol Granda Florists, perfumed by a hundred dozen roses and bushels of lavender. Fiona wished someone would send her roses once in her life. Just once. Anyone.

Kitty-corner from this was The Pink Rabbit, a health-food co-op and juice bar. A plywood rabbit sat upright on the corner drinking from a plastic cup full of frothy green liquid. Eliot loved to hang out there. Thursday afternoons was open mic, where he pretended never to listen to the folksingers.

Opposite the Rabbit squatted the Colonial columns of Ringo's All American Pizza Palace. It was supposed to look like a miniature version of the White House in Washington, D.C. . . . only one of the wings was bare cinder block—a recent addition that would one day house four lanes of bowling. Next to the double-glass-door entrance was a mural of Uncle Sam with a red, white, and blue bowling ball in one hand, and in the other a wedge of gooey pizza.

At this junction, the smells from the three buildings collided: rose, laven-

der, freshly pulped carrots and oranges, clove cigarettes, yeast, and pepperoni.

The nexus of all these things that didn't belong together, of course, was Ringo's. Pizza originally came from Naples, Italy. Bowling came from Germany or possibly ancient Egypt. And the Colonial architecture drew much of its influence from Renaissance style. This logically made it "All American."

They hesitated at the double glass doors.

Fiona didn't want to go in. More was wrong with Ringo's than clashing styles, busing tables, and washing dishes.

Behind them, however, was the invisible hand of Grandmother pushing them onward. *Work is the cornerstone of character*, she was always telling them.

They had worked at Oakwood Apartments for Grandmother since Fiona could remember, sweeping and polishing the miles of wood flooring. As soon as they turned thirteen, Grandmother obtained work permits for them (Fiona suspected they were forged) and found them jobs.

Fiona made the first move, grabbing the handle and pulling it open for Eliot.

"Come on," she said. "It's only a four-hour shift. We can do it."

"Yeah." Eliot's face screwed into a mask of worry. "It'll be easy."

He moved through the doorway and Fiona stepped through with him. The air-conditioning hit her like an arctic gale. It was always too cold in here. She should have worn her sweater over this dress.

The day manager, Mike, stood at the host's podium, arms crossed over his chest.

"Five minutes late," he announced. "I'm going to dock an hour's pay."

Eliot started to step forward, but she bumped him—a warning to keep his mouth shut.

They weren't late . . . even stopping for that bum, they had had fifteen minutes to get here. The less said to Mike, however, the better. He'd start docking them for other things they didn't do.

Mike Poole was back in Del Sombra for the summer. He was a sophomore at Berkeley. He might have been handsome with a shock of silky red hair, and freckled forearms, but his eyes held all the intelligence of a bovine's and a glimmer of cruelty.

He slipped a slender book under the podium's calendar, but not before Fiona saw it was Cliff's Notes on *Macbeth*.

She'd read her version of the play a dozen times.²

Fiona could probably recite *Macbeth* to Mike if she had to and help him sound out the big words.

"So . . . Fiona." Mike stepped around the podium. "Think over the hostess thing? I could train you. It'd be easy." He smiled and that evil-cow gaze dropped and then traced up her length with elevator eyes. "You'd be great."

Fiona looked away, her shoulders hunched, and she felt her face heat. "Not so good with people," she whispered. "No. Thanks."

"That's part of the training," Mike cooed.

Next to her, Eliot balled his hands into fists.

Fiona stepped in front of her brother. "It's okay," she said. "Busing is fine. It's great."

"Suit yourself." Mike snorted. "Someone on the night shift got sick, and they left the party room for you." Mike finally noticed Eliot and said, "Trash cans need rinsing today, kid. Get to it before dishes. Make sure you use bleach."

"No problem," Fiona said.

She moved past Mike, and Eliot followed her into the dining room. In the back was the separate party room, and to their left was the swinging door that led to the kitchen.

She felt Mike's eyes locked on her backside and revised her estimation of them: They weren't cow eyes. That was unfair to bovines. He had the eyes of a rat.

Sunlight flooded the dining room through picture windows. Five of the fifteen tables already had lunchtime customers, people wearing the uniforms of wine-country tourists: men in khaki slacks and loose silk shirts; the women in designer jeans, sweaters, and sixteen pounds of gold jewelry.

The place would be packed by eleven thirty, and Eliot and Fiona would be running to get everything clean for the real crowds at noon.

Ringo's may have been a conglomeration of unlikely styles and questionable taste, but situated on the most picturesque country artery between San

2. One artifact found intact at the Oakwood Apartments site was a *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, published in the eighteenth century (ref catalog: 49931-D). It is intriguing as every mythological reference had been stricken with an indelible marker. For example, passages mentioning Hecate, and the entire scene with the three witches, had been redacted from *Macbeth*. *Gods of the First and Twenty-first Century, Volume 11: The Post Family Mythology*, 8th ed. (Zypheron Press Ltd.).

Francisco and the heart of California's wine country; its location was perfect to siphon money from tourists.

Eliot walked straight into Fiona as if she weren't there.

She turned and saw why. His eyes had been glued to Linda, who waited tables today. Linda had that effect on guys.

Fiona grabbed Eliot by the shoulders and pointed him toward the swinging kitchen door. "Better get busy before Mike comes looking," she murmured.

He blinked. "Right."

"Keep your head above water." This was a not-so-veiled reference to his height, his poor swimming ability, and the gigantic sink where he'd be spending the next four hours.

Eliot glowered, then brightened as he thought of his own insult: "Keep it clean."

This was a reference to the messy reality of Fiona's job: busing tables at Ringo's meant getting up close and personal with spattered marinara sauce, spilled olive oil, cornmeal crumbs . . . all of which got in her dress and her hair no matter how careful she was. And although she showered every night, the scents lingered.

Eliot pushed through the kitchen door, and Fiona grabbed the busing cart by the wall, maneuvering it back toward the party room.

She observed Linda as she chatted with the customers about the road and the weather. Customers always laughed at Linda's jokes, and when she suggested the pasta special, they usually ordered it. Maybe it was her looks. She could have been a model with her perfect makeup, spiky blond hair, and the way her skirt, pink shirt, and long, curved nails seemed to color coordinate.

Linda even deflected Mike's come-ons, somehow smiling all the time as he stood too close and stared at her. She always had an excuse not to go out with him, yet he never got angry with her.

She spotted Fiona, gave her a nod and a smile, which instantly faded.

Just like Mike, Linda managed to appear friendly to Fiona without ever really *being* friendly.

Fiona waved awkwardly and looked away. She straightened her dress, although no matter what she did, it still looked wrinkled. She wished she had the nerve to tell Cee she hated the clothes she made them, but that would have broken the old woman's heart.

She snuck another glance at Linda, laughing with her customers. They

left her great tips. It wasn't just her looks. Linda knew how to talk to people. Fiona would have given anything to be as confident. Every time she had to talk to strangers, her heart pounded so hard she could barely hear her own mouse voice as it tried to squeak out something clever. She couldn't look someone in the eyes to save her life, and she spent most of the day staring at her feet.

If shyness were a disease, Fiona would have been rushed to intensive care and put on a social respirator.

She sighed and halted at the party room doors.

Something was wrong; they were shut.

The party room was always left open during the day so customers could see the large table that sat two dozen, the wet bar and the television, and be tempted to book it for sports events or birthday parties. Forty dollars and it was yours for the evening.

Then the smell hit her: vanilla and pesto and an acrid scent that wasn't food . . . anymore.

She stiffened and pulled the sliding doors apart.

It was instantly apparent what had happened last night: twenty sugar-crazed spider monkeys had been locked in this room under the pretense of a six-year-old's birthday party. Scattered on the walls, floor, and only by the sheerest of coincidences the table, were pasta, pizza crusts, globs of congealed cheese, baby-blue frosting, and pools of melted ice cream. And over everything was a sprinkling of confetti.

In the corner was a chunky orange spatter, and Fiona then understood that when Mike had told her someone on the night shift had gotten sick, he didn't mean one of the staff.

Fiona pushed the cart in and closed the doors behind her. No need to expose the paying customers to this.

She pulled a hairnet over her head, then tied a bandanna over this. Next came a chin-to-knee, white linen apron, and finally she snapped on thick rubber gloves. This was her armor.

She swept up the confetti, food, and bits of wrapping paper (which had tiny robots on it). She then used the dustpan to scrape off slimier things.

Fiona wondered what it would be like to have a real birthday party. She and Eliot had a brief ceremony on the morning of their birthdays. Cee tried to make something special for breakfast, and they pretended to enjoy it. There were presents: books usually, pen sets, or blank journals. But never wrapped in colored paper. And certainly not paper with robots printed on it.

Of course to have a real birthday party you needed friends and balloons and games. Fiona could never see that happening in Grandmother's apartment.

She halted in the middle of sponging up a puddle of olive oil, suddenly angry at Grandmother and her 106 rules.

Could Fiona be like Linda without those rules? Able to speak to people? Smile? Keep her eyes off her shoes? She wouldn't have a job. She'd have spent her summers at her friends' houses, slumber parties, and midnight movies . . . mythological occurrences that seemed far less real to her than the dusty histories on the shelves of her room.

Fiona felt drained. She would just lie down and they could find her here at the end of the shift.

A flash caught her eye. A fleck of red foil, partially hidden under a paper plate, glimmered. She moved the plate and spied a piece of unwrapped candy. Printed on it were the words *ULTRA DARK SPECIAL*.

Her heart quickened and she stepped closer.

It was chocolate.

While not specifically forbidden by Grandmother's rules, it was as rare in her life as a day without homework. Cee had it in the kitchen, semi-sweet chips, cocoa powder, or sometimes a brick of bitter baking chocolate . . . which she then transformed into cookies, mole, and Christmas fudge—that were only by a loosest definition "eatable." Fiona had snuck a taste once, a few chips before Cee had rapped her knuckles with a wooden spoon. It had been worth it.

She gingerly removed one glove and picked up the morsel. It was heart-shaped and was at first cold, but then quickly warmed to her touch.

Should she save it for after work? No. A million things could happen between now and then to the tiny sweet—dunked in water, smashed, stolen—best to eat it now.

What about Eliot? She should share it with him, shouldn't she?

It was so small, though. *Maybe* two bites.

She removed her other glove and carefully peeled back the red foil. Inside was a dark lozenge of black with swirls of midnight and eddies of the deepest brown. She inhaled a rich scent of something inexplicable: it was secrets and love and whispers.

She took the tiniest bite.

The chocolate was smooth and yielded to her teeth. She closed her eyes and let it dissolve on her tongue, spreading like velvet. Warmth coursed

through her blood into her chest and stomach and thighs. The melting confection was sweet and bitter, smoky and electrically wonderful, and it slid over her palate.

She swallowed and her pulse thundered. She inhaled and held her breath a long moment, then let it all out with a sigh.

It was *so* good.

And then it was gone.

Was that what it would be like to kiss a boy? Like falling? Prickly heat and chills at the same time?

She looked at the half morsel still in her hand, one side scalloped from her bite. Her mouth watered.

As much as she wanted it, she steeled herself, then with great and deliberate care wrapped it back within the red foil.

That was for Eliot. He deserved a little goodness on his birthday, too.

She folded the chocolate in a clean paper towel and slid the precious package into her dress pocket.

Fiona pulled her gloves back on.

She felt better now. Full of energy.

Fiona finished cleaning the room faster than she ever imagined she could. The wooden floor and the Formica table gleamed. The only scent left in the place was a faint whiff of pine cleaner . . . although if she tried, Fiona could still remember the way the chocolate smelled.

She touched her pocket to make sure it was still there.

Fiona then opened the doors and pushed the now laden cart back to the kitchen.

As she wheeled through the swinging door, a blast of steamy air washed over her, along with the smells of strong soap and bleach. The day-shift cook gave her a quick wave. Each of Johnny's massive hands could toss a whirling cake of dough into the air at the same time. He returned his attention to the ovens. He had five pizzas in there, all bubbling with molten cheese.

Eliot was in the back of the kitchen, by the deep fryer. He stood hunched over the sink, which was as large as a bathtub. On either side towered stacks of sauce-spattered dishes, pans, and pots, all apparently left from last night.

Mike was always doing this to her and her brother: coming in the night before and telling the late shift to leave their mess for them.

Did he pick on Eliot because of his homemade clothes? Because he was smaller? Or did Fiona's refusing his offers have something to do with it?

She would never understand Mike Poole, and she didn't particularly want to, either.

"Need help?" she asked.

Eliot continued to scrub under the dingy water. "I'm fine." He tried to wipe the suds off his forehead, but his hand was just as soapy and left a new trail of scum there.

Fiona took the edge of her apron and wiped his face.

"Thanks," he whispered.

Fiona then removed the paper towel containing the chocolate from her pocket. She set it on a high shelf far away from the sink.

"No one's going to notice if I'm gone for a few minutes," she told him. "I'm helping."

Eliot nodded, unable to say "thank you" twice to his sister in the same day. She understood; it was apparently against the brother-sister code of never being *too* nice to one another.

Fiona stepped up to a stack of dishes. Cheese, sauces, and pasta had hardened to iron-hard consistency overnight.

Eliot scraped off the worst of the gunk with a steel spatula, then did a pre-rinse in scalding water before he handed the offending plate to her for final wash and rinse.

In ten minutes working together they moved half of one stack to the drying racks.

Fiona's hair was plastered to her forehead, and her apron was soaked through.

The kitchen door swung open a crack. Linda poked her head inside. "There you are," she said to Fiona. "Stuff's piling up out here." She flashed a not-so-friendly smile, then vanished back to the dining room.

Fiona undid her sopping apron, and underneath her dress was soaked and clinging to her skin. She shivered.

The kitchen door slammed open and Mike walked in, fuming. "Fiona, what—"

The urgency in his face drained away as he looked her over. His eyes bore into her.

"I'm going," she said, and her gaze dropped to the floor. She instinctively hunched over and folded her arms over her chest. Gooseflesh rippled over her body. "I just finished the back room."

"There's no rush." Mike's voice was calm, almost sweet now. He sidled

closer. “I *really* want you to think again about the hostess position. The hours are better. Pay’s better, too.”

Fiona’s cheeks burned and the hair on the back of her neck prickled.

“She said she wasn’t interested,” Eliot said, and stepped in front of her. “How many times does she have to say it?”

Fiona saw he held the steel spatula, the sharp edge angled at Mike’s face.

Mike’s smooth features rippled with emotion—amazement, anger—then settled into a serious glare.

“Back off, squirt. I’m talking to your sister.”

“Don’t,” Fiona whispered so softly she barely heard herself.

Eliot knuckles whitened around the spatula handle. He took a deep breath, then took one step closer to Mike, who towered a foot over him.

“No,” Eliot said. “*You’re* done talking.”

They stared at each other for a long time, then Fiona couldn’t take it anymore. She stood tall, moved next to her brother, and, although it took every ounce of her nerve, locked gazes with Mike.

“I said no once already,” Fiona said. “I meant it.”

Mike took a step back. For a split second, it seemed he was almost scared . . . of them both. He snorted. “Okay, whatever. Just get out there and get the tables clean. We’ve got customers waiting.”

He turned and stormed through the swinging kitchen door.

“Thanks,” Fiona whispered to her brother.

Eliot, trembling, said nothing and went back to the dishes.

Fiona noticed her hands were balled into fists and she relaxed. She felt like throwing up. She’d never stood up to anyone like that before. Neither of them had. Maybe fifteen was going to be a more interesting year than she had thought.

3

BROKEN TEACUP

Eliot, Fiona, and Great-Grandmother Cecilia sat at the dining room table. They all pretended that nothing was happening . . . even though something most certainly was.

The sun was low in the sky and amber light filtered through lace curtains. The polished wood of the table gleamed, and the white porcelain tea set was orange in the twilight.

Fiona had changed into her gray sweats after work and had her nose buried in Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, working on tonight's essay.

Cee squinted through her thick glasses as she wrote a letter to her cousin in Bavaria, scratching out the words with a fountain pen.

Eliot couldn't focus. He kept replaying the confrontation with Mike in his head, and adrenaline shot through his body as he imagined himself punching that creep in the face.

Mike, though, wasn't the only factor that made work impossible tonight. There were two other things.

Encyclopedias lay opened before Eliot. He had been researching Newton's mental breakdown in 1675, but much of the text had been crossed out with a black marker. Eliot inferred these redacted passages dealt with Newton's interest in alchemy.³

3. To what extent Newton pursued alchemy is unknown as his notes on the subject were destroyed in a laboratory fire. Although occult scholars claim he made breakthroughs in this area that led to later discoveries in mathematics, no evidence substantiates this nor any of the more fanciful legends of his Faust-like bargains with higher powers.

Sometimes seeing the zebra-striped pages made him so mad he wanted to throw the sullied books across the room.

That was Grandmother's RULE 55 in action.

RULE 55: No books, comics, films, or other media of the science fiction, fantasy, or horror genres—especially, but not limited to, the occult or pseudosciences (alchemy, spirituality, numerology, etc.) or any ancient or urban mythology.

Eliot called this the “nothing made up” rule.

Grandmother called the stuff “brain-rotting candy for simple minds.”

Honestly, with all the juicy bits blacked out, how was he supposed to write a good essay? At least she could have just drawn a line through the offending text, so he could see what it was all about.

RULE 55 and Mike's bullying, however, were part of the *ordinary* weirdness that was his life. But the thing really bothering all of them tonight was not.

Grandmother walked into the dining room from the kitchen. Her face was a mask of concentration, and her gray eyes looked as if they were staring at something miles away.

Her usual graceful stride was tense, as if she were waiting for something to spring from the shadows. But that was silly. Nothing ever scared Grandmother.

Still, her mood was infectious, and Eliot felt the skin along his spine crawl.

Grandmother stopped and cocked her head as if listening. She then smoothed both hands through her short silver hair and said, “I'm going to check the basement and side doors.”

This was her evening security check of the building. It was part of her duties as manager and perfectly normal. Telling them she was doing it, though, like a warning, was *not* normal.

“Of course,” Cee said. Her smile fluttered to life; she set her pen down and laid her trembling hands together. “I was just going to pour the tea. Should we wait for you?”

Chemical analysis of Newton's remains shows high levels of mercury, which may have been caused by his alchemy experiments and may account for his aberrant behavior in 1675. *Gods of the First and Twenty-first Century, Volume 3: The Pseudo Sciences*, 8th ed. (Zypheron Press Ltd.).

Grandmother marched to the front door, her boots clipping over the hardwood.

"No," she called back. She opened the door, paused, and said, "Eliot, eyes back on those books."

Eliot looked down immediately.

He heard the door close and the dead bolt lock.

Nothing scared Grandmother. Nothing. And the only other thing that ever put a dent in her totally-in-control armor was when Eliot and Fiona asked about Mom and Dad.

Eliot never thought of himself as an "orphan." Orphans were kids like David Copperfield who lived in state-run gulags. He and Fiona had family, a home, and neither of them even remembered their mom or dad.

But every time they asked, Grandmother would patiently explain that there had been a terrible accident at sea. That it happened when Eliot and Fiona were babies. Grandmother and Cecilia were the only close family, so naturally they took them in. No, there were no pictures. Everything had been aboard the ship that sank.

Whenever Grandmother told them this story, her smooth features scrunched together and lines wrinkled her forehead—not so much in pain, but as if it were physically exhausting for her to form the words.

But that paled with whatever was getting to her tonight. The look Eliot had seen in her eyes, well, the only word he could think of was *sharp*.

Fiona looked up from her books at the same time as Eliot, and they glanced at each other. She was thinking the same thing: something was wrong.

Eliot shrugged. Fiona bit her lower lip.

Cecilia took a jar from the tea set and measured out four spoonfuls—her own special mixture of chamomile, stevia, and green tea—into a strainer. She set this over the open teapot and poured steaming water through. The teapot had a spiderweb etched into its white glaze.⁴

"Did anything *different* happen today?" Cee asked nonchalantly. She handed Eliot his cup.

4. "Baba Jaga poured fouled river water, boiling hot, until it spilt from her teapot. The stone pot was coarse and covered with web lace and venomous spiders. 'What are you making?' the lost little girl asked, her eyes wide. 'Tea, babushka.' Baba Jaga smiled showing the points of her teeth. 'Sweet tea for my sweet morsel.'" Father Sildas Pious, *Mythica Improbiba* (translated version), c. thirteenth century.

“What makes you ask?” he said. Grandmother’s 106 rules had meticulously been engineered to eradicate anything interesting, and therefore different, from their lives.

Cee’s smile vanished for a moment, but immediately came back. “No reason, darling.” She handed Fiona a steaming cup. “Making conversation, that’s all.”

Every night Cee asked, “How was work?” Or once in a great while, “Did you have a nice day?” *That* was just making conversation. This wasn’t.

And yet, something different *had* happened: the old man with his violin, then Fiona and him actually standing up to Mike.

“Just another day,” Fiona replied as she examined the leaves swirling in her cup.

Cee nodded, accepting this, and drank her tea, one gulp, two, three, and it was gone. That was the way she did it. The hotter the beverage, the faster she seemed to drink.

Fiona didn’t want to tell Cee, and Eliot felt the same way. Talking about their bully boss would just upset her.

But there was more to it than that. That moment when Eliot and Fiona had stood up for themselves, they were a lot more than nearly fifteen-year-old geeks. They’d been strong. And if they told anyone about it, maybe the magic of that instant would vanish in a puff of smoke.

Eliot took a sip of his tea. It was sweet. Bits of green-tea leaf whirled around like stars in a galaxy.

Fiona set her hand on his arm and nodded at Cecilia.

Their great-grandmother sat transfixed staring into her empty teacup. Her hand trembled violently and the cup slipped.

It fell to the hardwood floor, bounced, and hit again—shattering.

“Oh, dear,” Cee said, blinking. She rose from her chair. “What a but-terfin—”

The front door opened with such force that it slammed against the wall and shook a cloud of dust off the nearby bookshelf.

Grandmother stood silhouetted in the doorway, her long, slender arms hanging loosely at her sides, hands open.

“Do not move,” she said.

She stepped into the light. Her face was cool and collected, but her gray eyes darted back and forth surveying the room. “There are fragments everywhere. I will get them.”

She moved to the table and knelt, plucking up the largest shards. Bits of tea leaves clung to the inner curves of the broken cup.

Oddly Grandmother wasn't just picking them up; in her left hand she cradled them, assembling the base and part of the sides until she held a razor-sharp ceramic lotus.

Grandmother stared into the partially reconstructed cup with the same look Eliot had seen before . . . sharp. As if you had asked her what she was doing and she looked up—the intensity of her gaze would have cut the question out of your throat.

Eliot's hand involuntarily rose to his neck.

Outside the sun set and the clouds blazed orange and scarlet. The light in the dining room tinged red. The white shards in Grandmother's hand looked as if they were dipped in blood.

She drew in a long breath and let it out in a sigh. Grandmother then closed her hand over the broken cup. She stood and looked at Cee, then Fiona and Eliot. Her eyes were their normal iron gray.

"Drink your tea," she murmured.

Eliot and Fiona obeyed.

"Cecilia, clean the rest of this up."

"Of course." Cee hurried into the kitchen for a broom and dustpan.

"I can help," Fiona offered.

"No." Grandmother's face warmed a bit, and a slight smile struggled to life on her lips. "You two get ready for bed."

"We need to finish our homework," Eliot protested. "There's the Newton essay and the rewrite of the 1812 paper."

"Homework is canceled tonight," Grandmother said. ". . . For your birthdays."

Eliot looked to his sister, and she looked to him.

He wasn't going to argue, but homework had never before been canceled. Rain, snow, sickness, or exhaustion, you always turned it in.

Grandmother gave Fiona a hug and kiss, then knelt and beckoned to Eliot.

He embraced her. She barely touched him, though, as if she were afraid she might hurt him if she squeezed too hard. He kissed her cheek, and she his.

Eliot and Fiona marched down the hallway.

"Even," Fiona whispered.

“Fine,” he whispered back.

She said, “One, two, three . . .”

They simultaneously blurted out numbers. Eliot’s was seven. Fiona had three. Add them together and you got ten, an even number.

She smiled and tromped into the bathroom.

Somehow she always won that game. Eliot hadn’t figured out her trick yet, but there had to be one.

He waited in the hallway as it filled with shadows. He snuck a sideways glance into the dining room. Grandmother had her back to him, but he could make out Cecilia as Grandmother spoke to her in murmurs. Cee nodded vigorously, and her hands had stopped their usual shaking. The old woman looked pale.

He caught a few hushed words in their conversation—in hard German consonants. Fiona was good at languages; he wished she were out here.

He made out one word: *versteckt*.

Maybe all the mystery was about their birthdays tomorrow. Maybe they were planning something different. A surprise.

The bathroom door opened and light spilled into the hall.

“All yours, stinky,” Fiona said, and marched into her bedroom.

Eliot entered the bathroom and closed the door. It smelled of Cecilia’s strong homemade soap. The stuff left his skin tingling, part cleaned, part caustic burn.

His attention riveted to a spot of red in the sink: a circle of reflective crumpled crimson foil.

He carefully picked it up and saw it was a wrapped chocolate. He glanced at the mirror over the sink. There were smudges. He leaned closer and breathed on the glass.

Words appeared in Fiona’s looping cursive:

Eat it quick! Happy B-Day.

He peeled back the foil. Inside was half a chocolate morsel with bite marks on one side. Eliot smiled—popped it into his mouth and munched.

It was good . . . but before he could even taste it, it was gone.

He wasn’t sure where Fiona had gotten it, but chocolate was a rare treat—especially chocolate that Cecilia hadn’t ruined with her cooking. He loved the old woman, but honestly, one day she was going to poison them all.

He carefully wiped the mirror with his towel.

Eliot then wadded the foil, wrapped it inside toilet paper, and flushed it away.

There was no rule about chocolate, but that didn't mean there couldn't be a new one created if Grandmother started finding wrappers.

He searched for more surprises, but found none, so he got out the tooth powder and brushed his teeth.

From the heater vent in the floor he heard, "Psst."

Eliot rinsed and crouched by the vent. "Hey—thanks."

"It was nothing," Fiona whispered back.

This was how they talked after lights out. The vent in the bathroom was best, but they could listen to each other from their bedroom vents, too, if they put their heads to them and covered themselves with a blanket to muffle the noise.

"What do you think is going on tonight?" Fiona asked. "I get chills when I think about how Grandmother's acting."

"Yeah . . ." Eliot remembered the intensity of her eyes, and gooseflesh crawled up his arms. "I heard them talking in German. What's *versteckt* mean?"

"Um . . . to hide. Or hidden, concealed."

"Maybe they're talking about birthday presents?"

"Maybe." Eliot could tell from her flat tone that she didn't think so, either.

They were both quiet a moment, then Fiona finally said, "At work today . . . I appreciate what you did."

"It's okay. I think it's going to be better at Ringo's from now on."

". . . Sure. We better go before they hear us."

"Hey, one more thing."

"What?"

Eliot wanted to say a lot of things. Such as, if he had to get saddled with a creepy sister, he was glad it was her. That none of his homework would be half as good if not for her help. That—it even hurt to think about this—he kind of somehow almost liked her.

But instead he just said, "Happy tomorrow birthday."

"You, too."

The other side of the vent suddenly felt empty.

Eliot stood and washed his face, then glanced at the mirror. He still looked like a species of *dorkus maximus*. Maybe that would all change tomorrow. Fifteen.

He sighed and turned off the light.

4

DRIVER'S EDUCATION

Robert Farmington watched his boss, Marcus Welmann, pick the lock on the frosted-glass door.

Technically this was illegal, but it was a lawyer's office, and those guys mutilated the law all the time anyway.

Robert worked for Welmann and Associates Investigations, though there were no "associates," and neither he nor Welmann were licensed investigators. Tonight they were here to find some confidential files on a missing old lady. No big deal.

He glanced down the deserted hallway, then out the window to the street two floors below. This burb was a graveyard at three in the morning. Del Sombra it was called. "Of the shadows" in Spanish. Weird name for a town.

He looked back at Welmann as the man levered the tiny lock with his massive arms.

Marcus Welmann wore baggy camo pants, a black T-shirt, and running sneakers with the reflective stripes ripped off. Not exactly a male model. He was sixty years old and two hundred and fifty pounds of grizzled muscle. His large hands would be the envy of any NBA forward. Great for clobbering. Not so good for delicate work.

Robert inched closer and whispered, "You want me to pop it? I can do it in ten seconds flat."

Welmann turned to Robert. His eyes narrowed—a warning that his protégé better shut his trap or he'd be waiting outside in the car.

Welmann hated saying more than a dozen words a day; it was part of his

Neanderthal act. He had a Harvard MBA and had been a navy med tech, but he always played it dumb, which made people underestimate him.

Robert crossed his arms and did his best James Dean back at Welmann—not a stretch because Robert wore the black leather jacket, jeans, and biker boots that was the uniform of any teenage rebel.

Welmann returned to the stubborn lock and ran one finger over the scratched keyhole.

His face brightened. He grabbed the knob, twisted, and it turned.

“Already opened,” Welmann muttered.

Within the office a beam of light bisected the shadows. Someone was inside . . . and from Robert’s experience it was rarely the janitor.

Welmann let go of the knob and slid to the side of the door so whoever was inside wouldn’t see his silhouette out here.

Robert flattened himself against the outer hall wall, as well.

Welmann waved to get Robert’s attention and pointed back the way they had come, indicating that he hightail it.

Robert wasn’t going anywhere. Eight months of training, he could handle this.

Welmann reached for the holster in the small of his back and drew a weighty revolver of polished steel, his Colt Python Elite .357 Magnum.

Robert pointed at Welmann’s sneaker and made a “give me” gesture.

Welmann unthinkingly grabbed for the Taurus PT-145 in his ankle holster, a tiny polymer gun with a barrel no longer than its slight grip . . . but he stopped, pointed emphatically back at Robert, then jabbed at the floor, indicating that he stay put.

Robert nodded. With one meaty fist Welmann could easily make him stay put.

Welmann gripped the doorknob and burst into the office.

Robert peeked inside, spotting the source of the light: a penlight on a desk. It rolled over empty file folders.

Welmann snatched up the flashlight and crossed it over his opposite wrist, sweeping his aim over the office. The place was the size of a two-car garage, but it was crammed with six desks, a wall of filing cabinets, and posters of mountains and white-water rafters with the titles PERSISTENCE and INTEGRITY. Light from the sodium-vapor streetlamps outside filtered through the windows and tinged it all unnatural orange.

Welmann checked behind every desk. “No one here,” he whispered. “Damned weird.”

Robert eased inside and double-checked behind the door. Just shadows there. So who had used that flashlight?

Welmann saw Robert and glared, chewing over words that didn't make it out of his mouth. What could he say? The place was deserted.

Robert was about to tell Welmann where he could stuff his "I'm trying to teach you something" shtick—when something appeared behind Robert . . . a creeping presence, big and breathing. It cleared its throat.

Robert wheeled around.

The shadows behind the door parted like a curtain. A glowing cigarette ember revealed a smile that would have made the Cheshire cat blush.

From this slight shadow resolved a Samoan man in a black suit, dark gray shirt, and a black tie with a tiny emerald skull tie tack.

Robert thought it was funny that he noticed that little detail—because this guy was seven foot, easy, and there had to be four hundred pounds of him poured into that Armani.

"Damned weird?" the man said in a rumble of a baritone voice. "An interesting choice of words."

Robert wanted to panic, that's what his hammering heart urged him to do. But Welmann had trained him: made him read a hundred *Vault of Horror* comics and watch every D-grade Italian slasher flick. Robert, at least in theory, was ready for the unexplained and unexpected . . . and a guy that could flatten a professional NFL linebacker stepping out of nowhere certainly qualified.

There was no way they could fight this guy. Nowhere to run. That left two options: shoot him or bluff.

Robert swallowed; his throat was sandpaper. "Hey, how's it going?"

The smiling Samoan puffed on his cigarette. "I am fine, young man." He nodded to Welmann. "Set the pistol down. What are you looking for?"

Robert realized he was in Welmann's line of fire. Rookie mistake. He moved two steps to his left.

Welmann glared at the guy and gripped his Colt tighter.

"I detest *unnecessary* violence," the man said.

A chill ran up Robert's spine as he got the impression this guy probably considered most violence "necessary."

"If you will allow me?" The man reached into his coat.

"Careful, buddy," Welmann growled. "Two fingers."

The man nodded. He plucked out a business card and held it out to Robert.

Big guys like this weren't usually fast. So why did Robert imagine one of those massive hands grabbing him lightning quick and snapping his neck like Styrofoam?

Robert snatched the card.

On one side there were letters so black they didn't look like ink, but darkness coalesced. It took Robert a second to focus on them.

Mr. Uri Crumble

On the reverse side was a holographic logo. The ink was red-black and didn't look quite dry. Robert smelled blood, thick like a slaughterhouse. This odor stuck to the back of his throat and he gagged. He couldn't focus on the design: lines and tiny symbols that stretched into the air and deeper into the card.

Welmann hissed so loud that Robert swore he felt it on the back of his head.

Robert backed across the room and handed the card to him.

Welmann took one look at the thing and muttered, "Oh, hell." He lowered his aim a notch and carefully looked over Mr. Crumble.

"Indeed." Crumble puffed on his cigarette.

Welmann rubbed his face with his free hand. His ruddy cheeks drained of color as he holstered his gun.

Robert had never seen Welmann look scared and never seen him lower his gun. He was a gladiator—kill or be killed—it was genetically hardwired into him. Now suddenly Welmann looked like a little boy with his hand slapped.

And this Crumble, what was his deal? Sure he was the size of a bull ox, but nobody, not even someone that size, stared down the muzzle of a .357 Magnum without so much as a blink.

It was as if all the fundamentals that Robert had learned were being rewritten.

"What are *you* people doing here?" Welmann asked.

Crumble flashed a set of blindingly white teeth. "Looking for someone. Same as you, Driver."

Welmann opened his mouth to say something, then shut it with a click.

No one was supposed to know who they were . . . or *what* Welmann was.

"Your so-called car," Crumble explained, "parked in the alley. Such a vehicle with its modifications, here, tonight, could only belong to an errand boy."

He meant Welmann's 2005 Mercedes Maybach Exelero, the thing he prized more than his immortal soul. The one-of-a-kind four-door version had been handcrafted and purred with a twin-turbocharged V-12 that cranked out seven hundred horses. The Exelero was armored and fitted with bulletproof glass. The interior was butter-soft leather and koa wood. Outside she was sculpted mirror-chrome steel and black enamel so deep she made midnight jealous.

"You said you were looking for someone?" Welmann asked.

Mr. Uri Crumble nodded toward the filing cabinets on the far wall. One had its lock popped. "What was your interest in them? I wonder."

Robert made a mental note of "them." His and Welmann's current mission was to dig up information on *one* missing little old lady: Audrey Post. There was no "them."

Robert glanced at Welmann. He had on his poker face, but he'd bet Welmann was thinking the same thing.

Robert looked back to Crumble and noticed his cigarette wasn't burning. Well, it was; it smoldered and smoke curled from the tip . . . but there was no ash and it was the same length as when he'd first stepped from the shadows.

Crumble pulled a long drag from the curious never-and-ever-burning cigarette and caught Robert's stare. He exhaled, saying, "Perhaps we should share what we know and learn more."

Welmann frowned and adopted his best stupid, noir-detective act. "Buddy, you're speaking Greek, and I barely understand English."

Crumble grunted smoke. "Very well." He moved to the door, brushing aside a large steel desk as easily as Robert might have moved an empty cardboard box. Crumble paused and said, "After you report your failure tonight, your employers will not be pleased." He chuckled, the sound a sub-sonic ripple. "Keep my card. Give us a call. Our organization always has a use for qualified people."

"That'll be the day," Welmann replied.

"Yes . . . it will." Crumble turned sideways to fit through the office doorway and left.

Robert noticed he was holding his breath, so he exhaled. What did he mean by "report your failure"? This guy didn't even know whom they were looking for.

Welmann muttered a string of obscenities and looked down the hall-

way. "Gone," he said, and closed the door. He moved quickly to the filing cabinets.

Robert saw the one with the popped lock was labeled PA-PO.

"That's who we're looking for, right? Post? Probably the same old lady."

Welmann ignored the question and reached for the handle. He recoiled. "Stand back."

Robert moved closer to get a better look.

Welmann grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket and pulled the drawer. Smoke and plumes of sparks flew into the air. The files inside had been reduced to a pile of smoldering ash.

He slammed it shut.

Welmann glared about the office and nodded at the computers. "Get to work, kid."

Robert understood that now was not the time to ask questions. He moved from desk to desk, feeling the aluminum cases of the desktop units. "Got a warm one," he told Welmann. He sat and booted the machine.

Welmann hovered over Robert's shoulder, as if he didn't trust him to turn on a computer.

A blue screen flashed on the monitor.

"BIOS setup," Welmann muttered. "The drive has been wiped."

"So let's pull it, take it back, and scan it."

"Don't bother. When those guys erase something, it stays erased . . . permanently."

Robert repressed a shudder. He got the feeling that hard drives weren't the only things Crumble "erased."

"Who was that guy?"

"Works for another side," Welmann replied.

"What *other* side?" Robert turned around. "I thought our boss and the others didn't have sides."

Welmann scrunched his lips into a single white line. "I don't got all the answers, kid, but there *are* others. There's a truce between his people and ours. No one sticks their noses into each other's business. *Capisce?*"

"So this Crumble guy wasn't exactly what he appeared to be?"

Welmann shrugged, which meant yes, and said, "We got to be careful not to get caught between some big wheels. Might get ground to a pulp." His gaze moved from desk to desk. He got up and felt under the top of one. With a rip he pulled free a CD case taped there.

He handed it to Robert. “Lawyers always keep backups.”

Robert wheeled his chair to a nearby computer and snapped it on. He spotted a sticky note on the monitor with the password and typed it in. He then inserted the disk, and scrolled through the list of folders that flashed on-screen.

“Post,” Robert said. “There’s a file on her . . . no, wait. For ‘Post, F and E.’” He looked back through the folders. “No *Audrey* Post, boss. Sorry.”

“Open the file,” Welmann suggested, and pulled up a chair next to Robert’s.

Robert did as he was told and legal gobbledygook crawled over the monitor. After skimming a few pages he got the gist of it. “Trust-fund stuff. Some rich kids getting money from their great-grandmother. Blind accounts in the Caymans, Geneva—all over the world. Lucky brats. Not who we’re looking for, though.”

Welmann squinted at the document, too. His practiced Neanderthal scowl melted as he donned wire-rimmed reading glasses. He hit the PAGE DOWN key a few times.

“No,” Welmann muttered. “Crumble said ‘them’ . . . that he was looking for ‘them.’ What else do you have on”—he tapped the PAGE UP key thrice—“Fiona and Eliot Post?”

Robert tabbed back to the file folders. “Got a missing-kid kit. One of those jobs you can fill out and give to the police if little Johnny and Jane here ever get lost in the woods.”

“Let’s see it.”

On screen two photos appeared: one of a teenage boy, the other a girl. The pictures were head-and-shoulder shots with strong light and a dappled background. The subjects had forced smiles snapped at the precise wrong moment.

The boy was a few years younger than Robert, with black hair cut short and combed to either side. The kid had a deer-in-the-headlights expression, and the only word that came to mind was *geek*.

The girl looked as clueless as the boy; she had dark hair tied back in a ratty ponytail, no makeup, and a pimple on her chin. Her eyes had the same naïve gleam, and Robert thought of another word: *prissy*.

Robert checked their data sheets. Twin brother and sister, Fiona and Eliot. Robert memorized their address. Their birthdays, he noted, were tomorrow . . . actually today as it was three in the morning.

Welmann folded his glasses and put them away. He stared into the dis-

tance. "More than fifteen years," he whispered. "That how long our little old lady has been missing." He looked back at the pictures and squinted. "Has got to be the most cocked-up . . ."

Welmann's face turned ash white.

"What is it?" Robert asked.

"You got their address?"

Robert tapped the side of his head.

Welmann opened the computer's disk drive, grabbed the CD, and snapped it in half.

"Hey! What gives?"

Welmann turned to Robert, and his face set in a cast-iron mask of no-crap-listen-to-me-kid seriousness.

"I want you to get back to the boss and report everything: Crumble, these kids, give him their address. Do it in person. No phones." Welmann stood. "We got trouble two steps behind us. You drive and don't stop. You got to eat, drink, or piss—you suck it up and keep going."

"Okay." Robert wasn't sure what had just set Welmann off, but he wasn't about to question orders when they had gone to DEFCON 2. "What are you going to do?"

"I've got to get to those kids . . . before they do."

"You mean Crumble. This other side, right?"

Annoyance flickered over Welmann's wide face and he got out Mr. Uri Crumble's business card.

"Yeah." Welmann turned his head and blinked as if it hurt to look at the card so closely. He fished out his lighter, struck a flame, and touched it to the paper.

The flame caught. Welmann dropped the card.

Fire licked up the lines, flickered around the angular writing, and covered the logo on the back; white blackened to char, edges curled and glowed with embers; the pattern wriggled in the heat as if it were alive.

Five seconds it burned. Then ten seconds, and it continued to burn. The lines looked like heated metal and glowed brighter, and Robert found himself wanting to touch it . . . let it sear into his skin.

Welmann stomped it flat, and ash plumed over the floor.

Nothing remained except a sneaker imprint of pulverized cinders. Try as he might, Robert couldn't remember the curious design, even though he had just seen it.

"Freaky," Robert whispered.

Welmann reached into his pocket and got his car keys, hesitated, then handed them over.

Robert stared at them. No way was Welmann handing *him* the keys to the Maybach.

“Go on,” Welmann said.

He didn’t have to say it twice. Robert snatched them up. “You want *me* to drive?”

Welmann looked slightly nauseated, but nodded.

Robert’s elation faded. Welmann wouldn’t let him drive unless it had really hit the fan, as in, Welmann didn’t expect to be able to drive the thing again—ever.

“Take me with you,” Robert whispered. “You’ll need backup.”

Welmann nodded. “I bet I will. But you’re not coming.” He exhaled and looked Robert square in the eyes. “You got twice the balls that I had when I was sixteen. You’re going to make a great Driver.” He set a hand on Robert’s shoulder and squeezed. “But if you don’t do as I told you, I’m going to kick your ass.”

Robert wanted to say a lot of things: how Welmann was a son of a bitch, that he never liked him . . . and that the last thing he wanted was to leave him the way he had the string of replacement dads since he was a kid.

He fought to keep his eyes from watering. He was going to cry? Like a baby? In front of Welmann? He fought back the tears and nodded.

Robert moved to the door and paused.

Welmann flashed him a crooked smile and gave him a little wave that turned into a “shooing-away” motion.

Robert wondered when he’d see the guy who’d been the closest thing he’d had to a father . . . or even *if* he’d see him again. He sprinted down the hallway to the stairwell and didn’t look back. He had a feeling they were both on their own.

5

BIRTHDAY SURPRISES

Eliot reviewed his escape plan: When he got paid today, he'd head to the bus station instead of home. He'd get to Santa Rosa and hitchhike the rest of the way to San Francisco, where he'd arrange to work on a freighter to Shanghai . . . and from there maybe find his way to Tibet.

He glanced at the clock on his dresser: almost nine thirty. Time for the real world.

There was no escape plan. Eliot didn't have the nerve to hitchhike or con his way onto a freighter. He wished he did, though.

He got angry. Jeez, if he couldn't even escape in his daydreams, what was the point of anything?

He marched over to the milk crate by his dresser, stood on it, and looked in the mirror. He winced. Today he had to wear his "special" clothes. The ones Cecilia had spent considerable time and energy sewing for his birthday. As with her cooking, Cecilia's heart was in the right place, but the results could almost kill you.

Eliot's shirt was a collection of stripes that had once been in style, come back, then forever died the fashion death they richly deserved. Avocado, almond, and burnt orange had been put on this planet specifically to clash. He wouldn't have minded so much, but the alignment was off, so they offset midway on his chest. The pants were no better. Cecilia had decided pleats were "in," and these permanent creases bunched together around the zipper so it looked as if he wore a diaper.

He sighed, closed his eyes, and hoped he'd be invisible at work today . . . or that Mike would be too busy to harass him.

His daydream of escape returned, and for a moment he tasted salt air on the Indian Ocean—the start of a great adventure.

The clock on his dresser pinged.

He hopped off the milk crate and went to grab his homework, halting at his desk. There was no homework.

It felt good, but somehow wrong, not to have fallen asleep at his desk last night. Grandmother always meant exactly what she said, though, and last night she had said “no homework.” Yet, everything about last night seemed wrong: Cecilia acting jumpy; him and Fiona sent to bed early; that broken teacup.

Maybe the change was because of their birthdays. Grandmother had to realize that they’d soon be too old for homeschooling. What was she going to do when they went to college? Grandmother and Cee would be left alone to rattle around in this book-lined tomb of an apartment. He felt sorry for them.

Eliot moved to his door.

The List was taped there, 106 rules that might as well have been 106 feet of chain-link fencing and concertina wire. Every bit of the sympathy he had just felt for Grandmother evaporated.

He wanted to tear the List down, rip it into confetti . . . but the rules would still be there—invisible and ever present, essential to life in Grandmother’s house, like oxygen in the air.

And such tantrums did nothing. Last year Eliot had wanted a radio for his birthday, just for news he’d claimed. He promised there’d be no music. He had tried pleading, logic, and finally he had told Grandmother that *he* would buy a radio, and he didn’t need her permission.

Grandmother didn’t say a word. Instead, she halted his tirade with a single “sharp” gaze.

It was the same look she had last night. He’d forgotten that he had been on the receiving end of that look. It had felt as if his heart had stopped . . . not literally, but he recalled that he’d forgotten to breathe he’d been so absorbed by her fathomless gray eyes.

After what had seemed like minutes, Grandmother blinked, and he inhaled.

The “discussion” about his radio was over. Forever.

Angry all over again—Eliot yanked open his bedroom door.

In the darkened hallway Fiona’s door yanked open at the same time,

with exactly the same force, spilling another dim parallelogram of light into the shadows.

They stared at one another, then she said, "Happy birthday."

She was doing it again: that pretend twin synchronicity thing to bug him. One day he'd figure out how she did it.

Eliot's anger dimmed a little, though, as he recalled her present last night: the chocolate. Now that he thought about it, it was twice the gift that he had realized. He liked chocolate as much as the next person, but Fiona *loved* the stuff. How could one person be so nice one moment, then a total brat the next? Guess that was the short definition of a sister.

At least she hadn't escaped fashion disaster, either. Fiona also wore her Cecilia-made birthday outfit: a pink dress, misaligned at the seams, tight across the chest, and loose at the waist. A pink bow and sash about her middle cinched it awkwardly together. And a pair of white sneakers from the secondhand store had been colored with lavender marker in an attempt to make them match. She looked like a crumpled bubble-gum wrapper.

Fiona tried to smooth out the wrinkles and bunches in the fabric to no effect. She shot him a glare and said, "What are you staring at? Are you feeling okay? Hypoxia? Or anoxia?"

"I'm getting plenty of oxygen to my brain."

Fiona had been favoring medical terms in her openers for vocabulary insult. Good thing he had reviewed the premed texts on the bathroom shelves recently.

"You should switch from angiology to a field of study closer to your mental consistency," Eliot retorted. "Limacology."

Fiona's dark brows scrunched together.

He had her with this one. The *ology* part—"study of"—was a give-me. The *lima* though . . . that would get her. Even by *their* standards it was obscure. This would be one of the shortest games of vocabulary insult on record.

Eliot left her there to ponder his riddle and strolled down the hall, practically walking on air.

Behind him, Fiona whispered, "A lubricious puzzle from your equally slippery gray matter."

Eliot stopped. The grin on his face faded. She got it? So quick?

He turned. "How?"

Eliot closed his mouth, but it was too late. The damage had been done. He'd committed the one foul in vocabulary insult: asking for an explanation.

It was Fiona's turn to smile. She tilted her head and explained, "You had me for a second. I thought it was *lemma* as in the Greek for 'proposition,' as in *dilemma*, the decision between two propositions."

She was lecturing him. He loathed this but it was her right to claim—the only real prize in their game.

"But it was your clue about 'mental consistency' that really helped. I figured it had to be something slimy or sticky . . . which made me remember that *Limax maximus* is the leopard or common garden slug. After that it was easy." She snapped her fingers. "Limacology, the study of slugs. Good one. I hope you weren't saving it for a special occasion."

"Whatever," Eliot mumbled. "Score's still nothing to nothing."

She caught up to him, and together they walked into the dining room. They stopped on the threshold, however, stunned by what they saw.

The table, normally obscured with a layer of papers and books, had been cleared. The wood surface was polished to a dark mirror finish and draped with a lace tablecloth (that didn't fit). Four china plates were set out with linen place mats, napkins, and silver forks.

Across the picture window, a banner hung between the bookcases. It had been taped together from newspaper strips. On it, a laundry marker had been used to print HAPPY BIRTHDAY. The last few letters, though, shrank at the end as the calligrapher had run out of room.

Only there weren't supposed to be decorations in Grandmother's apartment.

Cecilia had made them cards last year. Each had tiny silhouettes of their faces on the outside, cut with exacting precision from black cardboard. Eliot couldn't imagine how Cee had done it with her trembling hands. It must have taken her forever.

Grandmother, however, had taken the cards and they'd never seen them again. She had said it violated RULE 11.

RULE 11: No painting, sketching, drawing, doodling, sculpting, papier-mâché, or anything in any way attempting to re-create nature or abstract themes with artistic methods (traditional, modern, electronic, or postmodern "interpretive").

That was the "no arts and crafts" rule.

Didn't this banner count?

Beyond the swinging door to the kitchen, Eliot heard humming and de-

tected the odors of baking bread, caramelized sugar, and citrus wafting into the room. Cee was cooking.

He glanced down the hallway. No one had yet seen him. He could dart back to his room, pretend he'd overslept, then run off to work—before he had to eat whatever “special treat” Cee had whipped up for them.

Fiona set her hand on his arm and whispered, “Don’t. She tries so hard.”

He exhaled. Cee did try . . . and he loved her for it. He wouldn’t disappoint her.

The kitchen door swung inward and diminutive Cecilia backed into the room. Today she wore her good white dress with lace cuffs and petticoats that rustled under the wide skirt. She turned and they saw the triple-layer strawberry shortcake in her withered hands. She beamed at them and set it unsteadily on the table.

Cee was a sweet old lady, but her sense of smell and taste had dried up sometime around the Second World War, and as a result the things she cooked could taste like anything: limes, sea salt, or with equal probability Worcestershire sauce.

“Happy birthday, my darlings.” She presented her culinary creation with a flourish. “I found this recipe in the *Ladies’ Journal* and made it especially for you.” Cecilia shuffled closer and hugged Fiona and Eliot together.

“Thanks, Cee,” they said.

She released them. “Oh, dear,” she whispered. “I forgot the pineapple and walnuts. And the candles! Stay right there.” She trundled back into the kitchen.

Eliot and Fiona stared at the cake. It was lopsided.

“You try it,” he whispered.

“No way. It’s your turn.”

Eliot sighed and took a tiny step closer. Pink and purple icing oozed from the cake’s layers. From the lower edge he scooped a fingerful.

The icing was gritty. Strawberry seeds? The cake part had the spongy consistency of cake . . . but you could never be too careful with Cecilia’s cooking. He smelled it: citrus and something else his nose couldn’t identify.

He braced himself and popped the bite into his mouth—quickly before he chickened out.

Thankfully the grittiness in the icing *was* strawberry seeds. It tasted good, tangy and sugary the way it ought to be . . . but then the icing melted, and his face involuntarily puckered. The cake was salty and sour: unmixed baking soda and a chunk of orange peel.

Cecilia pushed through the kitchen door with two bowls balanced on one arm, and a fistful of birthday candles and a box of matches in the other.

Eliot had no choice. He swallowed and smiled.

“Can I give you a hand?” Fiona offered.

“No, no, no.” Cecilia shook the box of matches at her. “Just stay there while I finish. No cheating and eating.” She dealt slices of pineapple onto the cake and sprinkled crushed walnuts over that. She then punctured the frosting skin with candles, carefully counting out thirty. Fifteen for Eliot. Fifteen for Fiona.

Cecilia could have skimped and just put one set of candles on the cake, but she was always trying to make them feel that they both got what they deserved.

“Thank you,” Fiona said.

“Yeah,” Eliot added, clearing his esophagus as best he could. “Thanks, Cee.”

“Now fire.” She slid open the box of matches, fumbled one out, and struck it with a shaking hand. The flame reflected in her dark eyes.

Eliot said, “Maybe you better—”

“Let me do it,” a voice behind them commanded.

Eliot and Fiona turned together as Grandmother entered the room.

“Good morning, Grandmother,” they said in unison.

Grandmother looked different today. Her short silver hair had been brushed to a silk sheen. She wore a red linen shirt with a button-down collar, khaki explorer pants, and midcalf black boots that were a shade less severe than the combat boots she usually favored.

She smiled at Eliot and Fiona, then glanced at the banner over the window. She said nothing and strode toward Cecilia, who shrank back, still holding her burning match.

Grandmother snatched it from her hand and quickly touched it to all thirty candles, lighting them. The match burned perilously close to her fingers, until she rolled it, squeezing the fire to a hissing ember.

“There,” Grandmother said. “Now both of you wish for happy tidings.”

Eliot mentally chalked off another year when there would be no singing “Happy Birthday” thanks to RULE 34.

Eliot and Fiona stepped up to the cake and leaned closer, inhaling at the same time.

They shot a quick look at each other. He knew Fiona was wishing for more chocolate.

Eliot wished for a stereo, guitar lessons, and rock-concert tickets. This was more like “praying for a miracle” than a “birthday wish,” but what the heck; it was worth a shot.

They both closed their eyes, blew for all they were worth, and extinguished every flame.

“Very good,” Grandmother said.

They turned just in time to get a flash in their faces from Grandmother’s antique windup film camera.

“One next to the cake, please,” she told them. “Together.”

Eliot and Fiona scooted closer—even though this violated their mutually agreed-on one-foot minimum distance from each other.

Cecilia sidled next to Eliot and put her arm around him.

Grandmother frowned. “Not you, Cecilia. I only have two shots left on this roll of film. We can’t waste any.”

“I’m sorry.” Cecilia backed into the corner.

Eliot forced a smile as Grandmother snapped the shot.

As if she could manufacture the perfect family if she got enough photos and stuck them in an album. Funny, now that Eliot thought about it: Grandmother’s assertion that all the pictures of their parents had sunk on that ocean liner didn’t ring true. She was always taking pictures of them. Why didn’t she have any pictures of her own daughter?

Cecilia reached for the cake platter.

“Presents first,” Grandmother said. She went to the china cabinet, whose shelves were filled with volumes of *St. Hawthorn’s Collected Reference of Horticulture*, and pulled out four paper bags.⁵

This was different. Usually Fiona and Eliot got a single present each.

Grandmother set the bags on the table. They had been stapled shut. Her wrapping wasn’t much in the way of festive, but it was effective.

If Eliot didn’t already know they contained clothes (what they got every year), he’d never have been able to guess.

She handed one bag to Eliot and one to Fiona.

5. *St. Hawthorn’s Collected Reference of Horticulture* (complete title on the inside page reads *St. Hawthorn’s Collected Reference of Horticulture in the New World and Beyond*). This nineteenth-century manuscript catalogs many plant species not found in the modern world. Many scholars claim such entries as the “Venom Creeper of Louisiana” are pure invention. Others speculate these might now be extinct species. The last of these volumes were seen at auction in 1939, where they sold for £40,000. Victor Golden, *Golden’s Guide to Extraordinary Books* (Oxford: 1958).

He hefted his: heavier than he expected, too dense to be a new shirt or slacks. Fiona held hers up, and one brow rose in puzzlement.

"Go ahead," Grandmother said, the slightest enthusiasm creeping into her voice. "Open them."

Eliot tore into the bag.

Inside, wrapped in a plastic sleeve, was an old book.

He hid his disappointment as best he could. When you lived in an apartment filled with thousands of books, the only thing less wanted than hand-me-down clothes was another book.

This one had a scuffed green leather cover and three ridges across the spine. As Eliot turned it over, he saw in faded gilt letters *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells.

He glanced at Fiona, and she stared with mouth agape at the book in her hands: *From the Earth to the Moon* by Jules Verne.

Eliot was speechless.

While the apartment *was* full of books, they were moldy century-old plays, desiccated histories, thick science textbooks, and biographies of people no one had ever cared about.

The book in his hand was . . . forbidden.

There was RULE 55, the no-made-up rule.

"These are classics," Grandmother explained. She set one slender hand on each of their shoulders to reassure them. "Not first editions, but still printed in the nineteenth century, so take good care of them."

Eliot marveled at his book. He'd seen this novel referenced in commentaries on great literature. He knew the basic premise. It was something he'd never had before: a science-fiction story he could escape into.

And if H. G. Wells was considered a "classic," did that mean Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe were up for grabs, too?

Eliot looked into Grandmother's eyes to see if she was serious, that this was for real. There was no heart-stopping, fathomless gaze there. She looked pleased that he liked her gift . . . and oddly a little worried, too.

"This is great," he said. "Super. Thanks a lot."

"Thank you, Grandmother," Fiona said. She held her Jules Verne to her chest.

Grandmother's thin lips parted in a restrained smile. "You're quite welcome. This is a special year for you two. You're growing up faster than I ever imagined."

"Cake anyone?" Cecilia said.

Grandmother turned to her and narrowed her eyes.

"I . . . I just thought," Cecilia whispered, "it might be a good time to eat?"

Grandmother considered, then said, "Yes, go get a knife, please."

Cecilia nodded and ambled into the kitchen.

"Now," Grandmother said, "you should open your other present before you go to work."

Eliot exchanged a glance with his sister. This was weird. Grandmother giving them a gift they'd actually enjoy, and now two gifts?

He wasn't going to ask questions. Too many questions irritated Grandmother, and her good moods were as fleeting as a rainbow in a hurricane.

Eliot grabbed the second paper bag. It was light and soft. It had to be clothes.

Cecilia returned carrying a stack of extra napkins, and a long chef's knife from the butcher's block. She set everything neatly on the table. She gazed lovingly at Eliot and Fiona.

"Well, go ahead," Grandmother said to her, irritated at this delay, then raised her camera to take another snapshot. "Cut the cake while the children—"

There was a knock at the front door. Three strong raps.

Grandmother frowned and the temperature in the apartment seemed to plummet ten degrees.

Cecilia paused, knife held over the cake. "Should I get that?"

"No." Grandmother lowered the camera and slowly turned. "Whoever this is better have an excellent reason for interrupting."

Eliot looked at Fiona, and she looked at him, shaking her head. Only one thing was worse than provoking Grandmother's anger, and that was finding her in a good mood and *then* provoking her. Whoever was at the door . . . Eliot pitied the poor guy.

6

TRAIL OF BREAD CRUMBS

Marcus Welmann thought the cinder-block apartment building was odd. Its second floor was shorter than the first floor by two feet. He paused to catch his breath on the stairwell landing and noticed the third story was shorter still, as if the place were shrinking.

He rubbed his face. He had to figure out why this Uri Crumble was so interested in the Post kids . . . and what the connection was to the lady he was looking for: Audrey Post.

The building that matched the address in the lawyer's file had been painted brown to look like wood (it didn't) and had a quaint Bavarian façade out front. Just the kind of tacky you'd expect in a Californian wine-country tourist trap.

There had been no *Post* on the mailboxes in the lobby, however, so he decided to try the building manager to see if he could get a forwarding address.

Welmann went up the steps and marched down the hallway to the manager's apartment, 3A.

Digging into his pocket, he grabbed his fake police shield. He then checked his Colt Python in its holster. He paused to make himself presentable—as much as anyone could in camo sweatpants and a black T-shirt. He zipped up his light polyester jacket.

He knocked, three times, hard, like a cop in a hurry.

Welmann waited and shifted his weight.

He hoped Robert made it back to the boss, and that the Mercedes was in one unscratched piece.

The kid had a good head, but there was too much “rebel” in Robert. He’d wash out of Driver’s training, which might be a good thing. Sixteen-year-old boys ought to worry about “kid” stuff: sex, drugs, and rock and roll . . . not becoming some hero.

Welmann heard footsteps and saw the peephole go dark. The door opened without the usual unlocking of dead bolts and unlatching of security chains.

He puffed up his chest and furrowed his brow. He’d need a good head of steam to blow at this manager—impress upon him that withholding a forwarding address would be obstructing justice. He looked up, fake shield in hand . . . but the bluster stalled in his throat.

The woman who answered was tall. How old? Fifty? Sixty? Hard to say. A mature woman, but with looks like hers, she could have been on magazine covers. Her cropped silver hair was elegant, and Welmann easily imagined her as the femme fatale in his favorite noir flicks.

“Can I help you?” she asked, studying him like a smear of dog poop on her boot.

Welmann had that elevator-going-down feeling—just enough to throw off his equilibrium.

He glanced into the apartment. There were a billion books: shelves on every vertical surface and stacks that overflowed into neat piles. They were real books, too, with leather and gilt letters; not a *TV Guide* in sight.

Whatever was bugging him, he didn’t see it . . . but he felt it: his skin itched and he fidgeted. There was *something* dangerous here.

“I’m looking for—”

Then he spotted them: at the end of the hall, sitting at a table, were Eliot and Fiona Post. They blinked at him with the same deer-in-the-headlights look as in their photographs.

The uneasy elevator feeling in Welmann halted—as the elevator snapped, and his stomach leapt into his throat.

He connected the dots. The manager in 3A. Post kids in 3A. No *Post* on the mailboxes because they were being hidden by the woman who stood in front of him. The woman he’d been trying to track down: Audrey Post.

Welmann looked into her gray eyes and only then *really* saw her.

He couldn’t pull his gaze away. There was power there—not like the shadowy illusion printed on Crumble’s business card, either. This was the roar of the ocean surf, an inexorable tide that sucked him deeper.

He was drowning. Couldn’t breathe.

“Looking for what?” she asked. “Mister . . . ?”

His trance broke and he found his voice. “Welmann,” he whispered, and cleared his throat. “Marcus Welmann.” He gave her a slight bow, which was the jerkiest thing he’d done in a long time. Somehow, though, it felt like the only thing to do.

Her gaze hardened and she opened the door wider. “Come in, Mr. Welmann.”

When his boss had given Welmann this mission, he had been crystal clear: find Audrey Post, report back, and do not under *any* circumstances engage.

Here he was engaging.

Welmann could sort this out—but he’d have to talk his way out of it . . . and that wasn’t his best thing.

Audrey Post led him inside.

He smelled something baking and the overpowering scent from the molding pages of all those books.

He saw a very old woman in the dining room, hovering over the children. She wore what might have been a costume from *Gone with the Wind* and looked ancient enough to have worn it during a real Civil War cotillion. She glared at him.

The boy and girl clutched books in their laps, and they stared at Welmann with that mix of annoyance and curiosity that was pure teenager.

Behind them, draped over the window, was a banner with HAPPY BIRTHDAY on it. Marcus was interrupting in a big, awkward way.

Good investigative technique—barging into the middle of these kids’ party. Nice and inconspicuous, he thought. Still, better him than Crumble.

“Children,” Audrey Post said, “this is Mr. Welmann, an old friend of the family.”

Welmann slipped the fake police shield back into his pocket. So much for that dodge. Audrey Post was playing another game, one where he didn’t understand the rules. Best go along for now.

The boy and girl exchanged looks and then stared at him. They were a year or two younger than Robert.

“Friend of the family?” Fiona leaned forward. “Did you know our parents, sir?”

“Shush,” Audrey Post told her. “Go—you’re late for work, both of you.” Her voice softened a bit and she added, “We’ll finish this later. I have business with this gentleman.”

Both kids glanced at some paper bags on the table, then said together, "Yes, Grandmother." They rose, nodded at Welmann, and retreated into the shadows of the apartment.

So Ms. Audrey Post was their grandmother. That made sense. Welmann listened, but detected no one else in the apartment. Where were the kids' mom and dad? Parents normally didn't miss birthdays. The girl, however, had asked him if he had *known* her parents. As in past tense. As in dead now.

Audrey Post turned to the old woman and said, "Cecilia, bring tea, please."

The older woman hesitated, opened her mouth as if to tell her something, but then backed into the kitchen, all the time watching Welmann.

The children reappeared and headed for the front door with lunch sacks. They each gave their grandmother a polite kiss on the cheek.

"It was nice to meet you, Mr. Welmann," Fiona said.

"Nice to meet you, too," he said.

Sweet kid. Polite. You didn't see that much anymore today. All the more reason to figure this out and move them somewhere safe from Crumble.

The kids left and closed the apartment door behind them.

"Now," Audrey Post said, "we will talk."

Welmann felt his equilibrium shift a few degrees more . . . as if the entire room had just tilted. He would have preferred a mano a mano with Mr. Uri Crumble. That would have been a lot safer. Audrey Post had power; any person with a blink of the sight could see that.

"You were sent to find me?"

Welmann wasn't stupid enough to lie. "Yes, ma'am."

"You are a Driver, correct?"

She could have picked up that cake, candles and all, and smashed it into his face, and that would have been less of a surprise.

Welmann felt an instinctual urge to take a few steps backward, but he held his ground, steeled himself, and nodded.

If she knew he was a Driver, and more important *what* a Driver was, then it followed that she knew his boss and probably why he was interested in her . . . which was more than *he'd* been told.

She didn't look the least bit worried about any of this, either. "What did they tell you about me?" Her gray eyes narrowed a bit.

Welmann swallowed, his throat bone-dry. So she didn't know everything. Good. The clairvoyant ones were always a pain in the ass.

"They said not to talk to you."

Audrey Post cocked her head as if listening for something, then glanced out the window to the street below. Marcus looked, too.

The kids appeared on the sidewalk. She turned back to him. "Do you know who I am?"

Was that a trick question? "Audrey Post," he offered.

This seemed to be the right thing because she smiled. It was a nice smile, and Welmann found himself relaxing a notch. He shook off that creeping complacency. He had to keep his guard up. This wasn't a game.

She eased into one of the seats at the dining table as gracefully as a lotus blossom settling onto a reflecting pool.

"Please"—she gestured to the opposite chair—"sit."

Welmann, far from being a gentleman, was no idiot. You didn't stand when a lady of power offered you a place at her table. He sat and the chair creaked from his generous frame.

The kitchen door swung inward, and the old woman backed into the dining room holding a tray with tea service.

She set it on the table and whispered, "Why are you talking to him?" She scowled at Welmann, then made a throat-slitting motion.

Welmann liked this full-of-venom little old lady. He quashed his chuckles, though; she wasn't kidding. Sweat trickled down his sides.

"The tea will be all, Cecilia."

Cecilia's gaze dropped to the floor. "Yes, yes, of course." She stepped back into the kitchen.

"How did you find me, Mr. Welmann?" Audrey Post asked.

"Your grandchildren."

Her eyes became slits and her lips compressed to a single line.

That struck a nerve. So no one was supposed to know about the kids? Maybe that was the card to play. "Eliot and Fiona," he said, "ages fifteen, twins."

Her delicate jaw clenched. He was definitely on the right track.

"My employer respects you. You two should talk." Welmann reached into his jacket for his cell phone.

"Put that down."

Welmann's hand immediately obeyed and dropped the phone. That was a nice trick. Audrey Post had the juice all right.

"Look." He leaned forward. "I'm just a Driver, but if you're in trouble, I can talk to them for you."

She closed her eyes. “So sincere,” she whispered. “That is sweet. But your employer and the rest of his family—I need not their favor, tolerance, or permission to do anything.”

Welmann didn’t get that. People didn’t come to his boss’s interest unless they merited favor or punishment. Both of which he knew how to do very well.

“How, precisely,” she said, “did you discover the children?”

Welmann was no genius, but the lightbulb finally flicked on in his head. Were the kids what this game of cat and mouse between all the players was about? Sure, he’d been sent after the grandmother, but maybe—as impossible as this sounded—his boss hadn’t known about the two kids.

He knew the smell of pay dirt, though, and those kids were *it*.

Welmann sipped his tea, chamomile in bone china. He was a black-coffee guy, but this was nice, too. It served as a much needed pause while he studied her and figured this all out.

Audrey Post shifted in her seat, her feathers ruffled.

“I didn’t find out nothing. A guy named Uri Crumble did the legwork.”

One of her eyebrows arched. “Crumble? Another Driver?”

“I don’t think so. At least not one who works for *my* people.”

Her smooth olive complexion paled and her lips parted in astonishment.

Apparently Audrey Post had a clue whom Crumble worked for, too. And if they were half as nasty as he heard they were, he could use that to flip her to his side.

“These are not guys you want to mess around with. They don’t exactly play by rules.”

She drew her hands together in a steeple. “Of course . . .” Her gaze drifted far away, deep in thought.

If Welmann had any advantage, he had to press it now. Make a connection with her and get her to trust him—for her own good. Sure, she had power; anyone could sense that. But no one had enough power to tangle with Crumble’s pals . . . or for that matter his boss.

“You and your grandkids are in danger,” he said with genuine concern. “I can help. The people I work for can help.”

“I know they can,” she whispered. She blinked rapidly, reached for her teacup, and sipped. She then stared into the bottom as if she could read the dregs.

The moment stretched into a vacuum of uncomfortable silence.

"Not to be rude or anything," Welmann said, "but time is running out. With Crumble involved, the sooner we move the better."

Audrey Post snapped out of her fugue and looked up.

She reached for a plate, picked up the eight-inch knife, and sliced the cake. "Would you like a piece, Mr. Welmann? Cecilia's cooking usually leaves something to be desired, but today she's made an effort."

Whatever connection Welmann thought he had made a second ago was gone. "I don't—"

"Understand?" A wry smile crept across her features. "This is, undoubtedly, for the best."

The danger he had felt before came rushing back. He flexed his ankle and felt the reassuring weight of his PT-145; he shifted forward, opening a gap between the chair and his spine so he could quickly draw his Colt Python if necessary.

Audrey Post inhaled deeply. "As you said, time is a consideration." She wiped the frosting off the kitchen knife with a napkin. "Now, you need to go, Mr. Welmann."

"If you don't let me help you, they'll find you."

"They'? Which 'they,' Driver?" She pointed the knife's tip at his heart. "I think 'they' have already found me. You would have never come here without reporting in, would you?"

He stood, held up his hands in a universal nonthreatening gesture, and took a step toward the door. "Okay, lady. Take it easy."

Welmann saw his reflection in her knife. That was bad luck. He was sweating so much now his shirt clung to his chest. But what was the worry? There was no way she could reach across the table. And he had two guns. He had to get a grip and make as graceful an exit as possible.

"Maybe like you said," he whispered. "I should go."

"You must do as your nature dictates and serve your master." She rose from her chair, still holding the knife. "As I must do as it is in my nature to do: protect my children."

He suddenly smelled death in the room: the corpse-dry paper from all those books, a formaldehyde scent, and somewhere . . . blood.

Welmann drew his Colt Python and aimed at her center of mass.

Audrey Post didn't blink; she didn't even look at the gun. She dimpled the cake with the tip of her blade. "You never said if you wanted cake."

"What?" Confused, he lowered his aim a notch. "I thought you wanted me to leave."

“No. I said you needed to go.” She looked up, locking stares with him. “As in ‘be removed.’”

Instinct took over. It had saved his skin a dozen times before.

No thinking. The meat part of him knew to move before she spoke again, and the nerves in his arm and hand squeezed.

Welman fired three times.

He blinked at the muzzle flash.

It took a split second for his vision to clear, and when it did, he saw a blur of steel arc at his throat.

No one could move that fast, not unless—

Audrey Post’s knife slashed through his carotid artery and severed his spine.

MORE BIRTHDAY SURPRISES

Fiona pushed through the side door of Oakwood Apartments. She paused on the sidewalk and tugged at her dress—pulling it down and across her torso—trying to straighten out the pink fabric. It had all bunched tighter during her sprint down the stairs.

It was warm already. The late-summer sun blazed low in the sky. Fiona squinted at it and wished she could have worn shorts and a T-shirt today.

Eliot banged through the door behind her.

“No fair,” he panted. “You . . . took off before . . . done tying my shoes.”

“I won. Get over it.” She frowned. “Who do you think that Mr. Welmann was?”

Eliot shook his head. “Grandmother said a ‘friend of the family.’ But she’s never had any friends just drop by like that.”

Grandmother, in fact, had no friends that either of them knew of.

Fiona walked up Midway Avenue and Eliot fell in at her side. “You think he knew Mom or Dad?”

“Why else would we be hustled out so fast?” she said.

Opening old wounds, Fiona thought. That’s what Cecilia always told them when they brought up their parents. Thinking about the past when there was nothing to learn, she said, you might as well be picking at a scab.

But Fiona wanted to know something—anything—*everything* about her parents. They were this gigantic jigsaw puzzle, just waiting to be put together . . . only the entire box of pieces had been set on a shelf by Grandmother just out of her reach.

"Does it matter?" she said. "What would it change if we heard a lousy story from that Welmann person?"

"Nothing," Eliot replied in a faraway voice.

She touched the slick, too shiny fabric of her birthday dress. It was poofy around her hips, corset-tight across her chest. She looked ridiculous. She glanced at Eliot: a collection of seething stripes. At least he'd be in the kitchen where no one could see him.

Clouds crossed over the sun and a breeze stirred the leaves in the gutter. Fiona welcomed the shade. She flipped her hair off her neck, her skin already tacky with sweat.

Fiona concentrated, bringing into focus all the things that hadn't fit in her metronome-regular life: no homework last night; the Jules Verne book Grandmother had given violating her own rule; the broken teacup last night . . .

Cecilia's hands always shook but she never dropped anything. At 104 years old, that blanking out could have been a stroke. Fiona couldn't imagine life without her great-grandmother. More accurately, she couldn't imagine life *alone* with Grandmother.

"You think she's okay?" Eliot asked.

"Cee? Yeah. She's a rock."

"How'd you know I meant her?" Eliot asked irritated.

Fiona shrugged. "Just wondering about that busted teacup."

"You saw how Grandmother looked at it?"

How could you miss it? Grandmother had stared at that cup with an intense laserlike focus . . . as if she were counting out the individual molecules in the ceramic shards.

Chill bumps rose on Fiona's forearms, and the world seemed to tilt; the clouds overhead darkened.

"Listen . . .," Eliot whispered.

Fiona didn't hear anything, though. It was as if someone had flipped a switch. No cars, no birds; even the hum of the power lines overhead had ceased.

There was a thumping, however; Fiona felt this rather than heard it, pulsing in the pit of her stomach.

Then tiny tinkling notes plunked over this, a jaunty rhythm just ahead: it echoed from the alleyway.

Eliot moved toward it, quickening his pace.

Fiona hurried to catch up—her disorientation increasing with every step.

She had the strangest urge to start skipping. As if she were a little girl and this was some extended game of hopscotch.

Eliot skidded to a halt at the alley's entrance.

The old bum sat there, cross-legged, smiling, playing his violin. About him lay tiny envelopes with violin strings uncoiling from a few. He had no bow, so he had the instrument in his lap and one hand slid over the neck; the other plucked the violin's new strings with great flourish as if his fingers were tiny Cossack dancers.

Eliot stepped closer to get a better look—near enough so the old man could have reached out and grabbed him.

Fiona touched Eliot's shoulder and gently tugged him back. She had wanted to yank him far from this bum, but she, too, felt like moving nearer, as if the sidewalk sloped precipitously toward the music, making it easy to move closer, harder to move away. Only her sisterly instinct to protect her brother held her back at all.

The old man looked up at them. His smile grew. The tempo of his tune increased.

The notes danced on the edges of her memory: a nursery rhyme. That was impossible because there were no nursery rhymes in Grandmother's house. This was older, though, *before* Grandmother. A tune someone had murmured to her when she was a baby.

Sleep, little baby, dance in your dreams, flowers and sunshine float down a stream.

The chill bumps on her arm were pebble hard. The music was the beat of her heart, the pulse of her blood; it made her sway; she tapped one foot.

Fiona smelled roses and freshly turned earth. She saw herself dancing around a whitewashed pole, colored ribbons about her, other children all laughing, singing, prancing round and round a maypole in an endless spiral.^{6,7}

6. One legend regarding the Children's Crusade of 1212 is of a German shepherd boy having a vision of Jesus dancing around a maypole. This led the boy to inspire thousands of other children to march to the Mediterranean, where they believed the sea would part and they would journey to the Holy Land. When the sea failed to part, many children, without guidance or provisions, were subsequently sold into slavery by Roman traders. *Gods of the First and Twenty-first Century, Volume 2: Divine Inspirations*, 8th ed. (Zypheron Press Ltd.).

7. "Round and round the pole we go / dancing to a seraphim's song / with angled harp and bended bow / a merry tune and we skip and sow." Nursery rhyme from Father Sildas Pious, *Mythica Improbiba* (translated version), c. thirteenth century.

The air was a blur around her and the alley melted away as watercolors in a rainstorm.

She distantly felt her hand slip off Eliot's shoulder.

The only things that remained in focus were the violin strings, but even those were a smear—plucked so fast they were a haze of vibrations.

She took a deep breath, half inhalation, half sigh . . . and caught the scent of sardines, perspiration, and sulfurous burnt matches. *Unclean* was the word that rose to the forefront of her fading conscious mind.

And as she watched the vibrations fill her vision, another word came to her: *chaos*.

Even more than the thought of the unwashed old man, the thought of chaos, never-ending turmoil, strife, out of control and wild, washing her away . . . for a reason she couldn't articulate, it made her mad.

She glared at the strings, focused on just one, as if she stared hard enough—like Grandmother—she could stop this out-of-control feeling.

With a twang, the string snapped.

The old man's hand flew from his violin, and he sucked the index finger.

After a second, he withdrew the finger and she saw blood welling where the string had cut.

The old man looked at Eliot, then Fiona, still smiling, and said, "Well, I'll be damned."

His voice was a rich and resonant alto. It wasn't what Fiona expected from someone who looked so shabby.

"That was great," Eliot breathed.

The man nodded at Eliot and took a little bow. He reached into the folds of his ragged coat and withdrew a wax-paper envelope. Inside were coiled strings. He gestured to the package like a stage magician, then smoothed one hand over the wood of his battered violin.

Fiona tapped her brother's shoulder and gently pulled him back. To the old man she said, "We have to get work . . . thanks." Her icy tone, however, effectively communicated that "thanks" was the last thing she meant.

The bum's smile faded a bit. He bowed again to them and started unwinding the broken string from the pegbox.

"Come on." Fiona pulled on Eliot.

Her brother whirled around and his eyes narrowed.

"If we're late two days in a row," she said, "Mike's really going to lose it."

Eliot's expression of annoyance melted into one of concern. "Yeah." He glanced back at the old man and waved. The man's full smile returned.

"Wasn't that the coolest thing?" Eliot whispered to her.

"No," she flatly replied. "It was kind of creepy."

Fiona did, however, begin to understand Eliot's fascination with music. It had taken her someplace else. Would it have been so bad if Grandmother let Eliot have a stupid radio? Or was she right? Would it have been too much of a distraction?

They hurried around the corner and found every parking spot near the intersection of Midway and Vine occupied with gleaming SUVs and Mercedes convertibles.

Tourists. Ringo's was going to be packed.

They crossed the street and ran up the stairs to the Pizza Palace.

Eliot held the door open and a blast of air-conditioning hit her. She shivered.

Mike was at the cashier's counter. He had just handed off a party of four to Linda to seat. He took one look at Eliot and Fiona and the color drained from his face.

"You've got to be kidding," he said. "Today's the start of the pinot noir festival in Napa—the place is jam-packed, and you two decide it's time to raid the Goodwill Dumpster for their costume rejects?"

Fiona flushed so hard that even in the air-conditioning she started to sweat again.

Eliot stepped forward to defend them. "Hey, don't—"

"The squirt," Mike said, cutting Eliot off, "can dress like whatever freak he wants to. But you." He looked Fiona over, disbelieving. "Wear that and everyone's going to lose their appetite."

This confirmed everything she had feared: her birthday dress really did look like a bad Halloween costume, all wrapped in a bow to put the finishing touch on her gift of humiliation.

She hated being in this family—with their rules, handmade clothes, never going anywhere. Tears blurred Fiona's vision and made the pink satin of her dress look like cotton candy.

"Wear this." Mike reached under the counter, grabbed a Ringo's T-shirt, and threw it to her. It hit her chest and fell to the floor.

She knelt, blinking as fast as she could to get rid of her tears, and picked up the shirt. An iron-on Uncle Sam smiled at her.

"I'll take it out of your paycheck," Mike told her.

Eliot's hands clenched.

"Okay," Fiona whispered. "No problem."

“And get one of the big heavy aprons from Johnny,” Mike said, “to cover up the rest.”

She nodded and her gaze dropped to the slate floor, no longer able to look Mike in the face. Her eyes and cheeks burned.

But she couldn't move. She didn't want the dress to rustle satin over satin and draw even more attention to it. And even if she could muffle the fabric, how was she going to cross the dining room to the kitchen with all those people watching her?

She froze there. Mortified.

Mike moved around the counter and grabbed her by the arm—his thumb digging into the crook of her elbow. Electric pain lanced down her forearm.

“Come on,” he growled. “Get—”

She wrenched free of his grasp. That hurt even more, but she ignored the pain, her head snapped up, and she stared him directly in the face.

“Don't!” she hissed through gritted teeth.

Her humiliation had been a wounded animal, curled into a fetal ball . . . but it had been provoked one too many times—and it uncoiled, rose up, and bared its fangs.

She sensed Eliot close at her side . . . ready to try to punch Mike in the nose. It was good to know he was there for her when it counted.

Fiona let her tears fall without blinking and continued to stare Mike down.

“Don't,” she whispered. It wasn't a whisper of shame, but one of barely contained rage. “Don't ever touch me again.”

Mike's mouth opened, as if he were going to say something, but no words came out. He slowly nodded, held up both hands in a “calm down” gesture, and slowly backed away.

“Whatever,” he breathed. “Just get that apron and get to work.”

But he didn't look away . . . somehow still caught in Fiona's glare. He twitched and his lips curled into a grimace, as if it hurt to remain there under her withering gaze.

The bell over the door jangled, and a couple entered.

She blinked. The spell broke.

Mike turned to the customers and his smile snapped into place. “Table for two?”

Fiona took a deep breath. She turned, then she and Eliot marched through the dining room to the kitchen.

If anyone stared at her dress, snickered, or pointed, she didn't see. Her eyes were firmly fixed upon the floor again.

She pushed through the swinging doors and examined her throbbing arm. Where Mike had grabbed her, fingertip bruises dotted her skin.

"You okay?" Eliot gently asked.

"Yeah. Sure." For the first time in her life she had felt like hitting someone other than her brother. No . . . not just "felt like." She would really have done it.

For a split second Fiona had focused her hate to a white-hot intensity. For a moment, she had wished that Mike Poole would never touch her, or anyone else, ever again. She had wanted him dead.



MIKE'S HAND

Eliot stood before the vast double-basin sink, one side drained, one side filled with murky water, suds floating on top like clouds.

This job sucked.

But Eliot was no quitter. He finished whatever he started, even if there was no way of winning.

Working at Ringo's, though, wasn't just another game—like a vocabulary insult or a race down the stairs. Nothing was worth Mike's abuse every day. He didn't mind the bullying so much; he could take it, but what Mike did to his sister . . .

Eliot imagined plunging his boss's head into the sink and giving him a good dunking . . . drowning him.

He inhaled, startled that his fantasy had turned so dark—more startled that it gave him a real sense of satisfaction.

Eliot sighed. At least the lunch shift was almost over.

He gazed at the water and his fingers unconsciously tapped the basin. That nursery-rhyme tune was still in his head. It played over and over and he imagined shapes in the suds. A violin coalesced, then a smile, a flock of white crows, and a hand. That hand reached out, and spinning slowly in the water, the fingers grasped and closed about an unseen object . . . then the fingers writhed in pain.

Johnny called from across the kitchen, "Hey, you okay, amigo?"

Eliot shook his head to clear the music. "Zoning out. Long shift."

Johnny dumped a bag of frozen wedge-cut potatoes into the deep fryer. Boiling grease hissed and popped. He stepped back and lowered the splash

guard, but not before drops splattered the concrete floor. Johnny frowned at this. He kept the kitchen antiseptic. He looked for a bucket and mop to immediately clean it up.

Fiona pushed through the kitchen door. She looked on the verge of tears.

Sweat soaked through the layers of cotton T-shirt, apron, and pink dress. Marinara sauce splattered her from chin to knees.

“Double table of *Lord of the Flies* kids,” she said, and took a deep breath. “I’m ready for a break.”

“I was just about to step out back,” Eliot told her. “Get some fresh air.”

She nodded, and they moved to the back door.

He’d broach the subject of Mike outside. They’d come up with some plan to get him off their backs.

Mike slammed into the kitchen. “Fiona wait,” he called after her.

She stopped and turned, her hands clasping each other so tight they were white.

Mike with his wavy, combed-back hair and his strong chin looked clean, fresh, and honest—everything he actually *wasn’t*.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Mike said. He glanced at Johnny and Eliot. “You guys give us a second?”

Johnny rubbed his face. Eliot could tell he didn’t want to leave Fiona alone with Mike. But Mike was the boss, and Johnny had a family to support with this job. He pulled the basket out of the deep fryer so the potatoes didn’t burn. A few more drops of grease splattered onto the floor. “I’ll take a smoke out back.”

Eliot crossed his arms over his chest. There was no way he was leaving Fiona alone.

Mike glared at Eliot for a full five seconds.

“Okay,” Mike said with a sigh, “you might as well hear this, too, squirt.”

Fiona stood as tall as she could and stepped closer to Eliot, but her eyes couldn’t quite rise off the floor. “What do you want?” she said.

Mike held up both hands, again in his patented “calm down” gesture. “I wanted to say I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to grab you like that.”

But Mike’s right hand involuntarily flexed, and Eliot wondered if he was remembering how he took his sister’s arm. From the glint in his eyes, it looked as if he had enjoyed it.

Eliot wanted this creep gone from their lives. Forever.

The little singsong nursery rhyme pranced through his mind.

"Let me take a look at your elbow." Mike came closer. He had on his most charming smile. "Is it bruised?"

Fiona curled her arm protectively to her body. "Stay away from me."

Mike halted and the warmth dissolved from his features. "If you two are thinking about telling Ringo anything—I was going to try and talk some reason here, but I think you don't want to be reasonable." His lips pursed. "You know what? Forget it. Both of you just grab your things and go."

"You . . . you're firing us?!" Fiona gasped. "For what?"

Eliot knew for what. So they wouldn't tell Ringo that his manager had assaulted one of his employees. Mike would fire them, and if they said anything, it would seem as if they were trying to get even. At least that's what Mike could say and get away with.

People like him *always* got away with it.

Mike's lips curled into a cruel smile. He was enjoying this.

"Why?" Mike said to Fiona. "Because you're both geeks. Because no one here wants to work with you. And because I *say* you're fired."

At that moment, Eliot had never hated anyone so much in his entire life. He wished Mike were dead.

Mike moved closer, maybe to better intimidate them, and stepped into a grease spot on the concrete floor.

He slipped and pitched face-first toward the deep fryer. One arm shot out to stop his fall—

—and it plunged into the boiling oil.

Mike screamed.

He rolled away. Fuming oil coated his arm up to the elbow, and the skin cooked and blistered.

He writhed on the floor, pulled his arm to him, then flung it away as the heat burned his chest.

Eliot and Fiona watched, horrified and dumbfounded for a heartbeat, then darted to his side.

The panic that had locked Eliot's brain vanished. He knew what to do. They'd both read and reread *Marcellus Masters's Practical First Aid and Surgical Guide*.⁸

8. Commissioned by Napoléon Bonaparte for his field surgeons. Bonaparte subsequently ordered all copies burned, proclaiming if such knowledge fell into the hands of his enemies, they would "gain miraculous powers to rejuvenate their front lines." Masters was made inspector general and was allegedly responsible for saving thousands of French soldiers. Four copies of the manual are known to exist and reported to have equivalent, in some cases better, advice to that in modern first-aid guides. Victor Golden, *Golden's Guide to Extraordinary Books*. (Oxford: 1958).

"Water," Fiona said.

"The sink," Eliot replied. "Careful. Don't touch his arm."

They lifted Mike by the armpits. He moaned and shivered. They dragged him to the sink and leaned him over the edge, his burned arm dangling into the basin.

Johnny ducked inside from the alley, cigarette dangling from his open mouth. When he saw Mike, he crossed himself.

"Call 911," Eliot shouted at him. "Now!"

Johnny sprinted to the phone on the wall.

Eliot swiveled the faucet over Mike's shoulder and turned on the cold water.

Mike screamed anew as water flowed down and over his burns. He tried to pull it out of the stream.

"No," Fiona whispered. "Keep it there or you could lose the arm."

"It's still burning," Eliot told him. "The grease is in your sleeve. We've got to cool it down."

Mike kept crying, whimpering, but he ceased trying to yank his arm away. He hung limp, sobbing, between them.

Eliot looked at his sister, and she looked at him. He knew that Fiona was thinking the same thing he was: that Mike had burned his *right* hand—the one that had grabbed her.

9

VACATION INTERRUPTED

Sealiah lounged under a palm canopy on her private beach on the island of Bora-Bora, her home away from home.⁹ The locals feared this place, claiming it was full of “bad magic,” for when maritime disasters struck, the currents inevitably washed the bloated bodies onto this shore. Of course, she did nothing to dissuade these rumors; privacy was a thing to be treasured and, when lost, mourned.

The gold sun reflected off talc-white sand. Even filtered by the canopy and mosquito netting, it toasted her body. Her skin was the color of molten bronze, and a rope of wet coppery hair twined around her neck and throat in a serpentine embrace. She was full of form but slender enough to have been a model, which she might have considered as it would have served her unquenchable vanity . . . but men and women already fell at her feet.

She sponged off her brow, which was still wet from this afternoon’s skinny-dip. She had played with the docile gray reef sharks and whipped them into a feeding frenzy until the waters were red and clouded with bits of the once-living. She licked her lips, tasted blood, and this blossomed into a rare smile.

It had been a delightful afternoon . . .

. . . about to be interrupted.

9. Although the proper pronunciation of this entity’s name (title?) has mutated through all of history, most scholars cite the common ancient use of “say-lay” as the most accurate. *Gods of the First and Twenty-first Century, Volume 13: Infernal Forces*, 8th ed. (Zypheron Press Ltd.).

An intruder was on her beach.

Her eyes opened to slits, and in her peripheral vision she saw a shadow on the path where sand met jungle. Whoever cast this shadow obviously wanted her to see it as it swayed back and forth.

Sealiah toyed with the emerald that nestled in her navel and pretended to ignore the dark visitor. Perhaps it was a curious tourist who would grow bored and leave.

But it stayed there, wavering . . . waiting.

“Come,” she said with an expelled sigh.

Why were these moments—just as she was about to fully and completely relax—always, without fail, with set-your-atomic-clock-by-it precision, interrupted?

She sat up and was, save for the emerald in her navel and the knife strapped to her calf, still nude from her earlier swim.

Her last lover had bragged to his friends, describing her as “raw with feral beauty.” She had appreciated his compliment, but not so much appreciated his lack of discretion, and soon thereafter said lover learned exactly how feral she could be.

The shadow skulked from the jungle, resolving into a Samoan man in a black silk windbreaker, shorts, and baseball cap. He fell at her feet, worshipful, his face nestled an inch from her toes, which, had she allowed, he would have kissed.

“Enough.” She waved her hand. “Up, up. Say what you came to tell me and then depart.”

The man stood, towering two heads over her. He was Urakabameel, sometimes Mr. Uri Crumble, or just Uri when she was in a familial mood, her second-in-command of special operations.

He backed away a respectful two paces, and with eyes cast to the ground he reached into his jacket and withdrew a tiny black book that bulged to the bursting point with extra pages and a rainbow assortment of sticky notes. He opened it, seemingly at random, and read.

“M'lady Sealiah,” he said in a rumbling baritone voice, “the London Exchange dropped eight percent on opening. Our associates in Oxford are nervous. They demand you shore up the investment.”

“Really? Well, ‘demands’ in the middle of my vacation are not granted.” She crinkled her nose. “Sell my shares. I’ll take profit today.”

“That will cause a run on the three banks in—”

"I said *sell*."

Uri bowed. "As you command."

"Let Britannia burn and sink into the sea for all I care. Next?"

"A minor thing: the ambassador from Manila has sent you a gift of three Andalusian mares. I did not know what you wanted done with the animals. He also wishes to schedule lunch at your earliest convenience."

"Oh, how wonderful," she cried with joy. "Andalusians are not animals, Uri. They are treasures to be loved." She tapped her lip with a curved, red fingernail and thoughtfully hummed. "Have stables constructed at the Subic Bay villa, and I will teach these magnificent ladies to gallop in the surf of the South China Sea. Tell the ambassador, Saturday, New York. At Mit-sukoshi's."

"Very good." Uri bowed again and started to back away.

"Was there anything else?"

"Nothing. Only a trivial matter that her ladyship need not bother with." He closed his book and tucked it into his jacket.

She grabbed his wrist, digging in her nails. He flinched.

"Show me."

Uri handed her his black book, and she flipped it open with her left hand. She continued to hold him with her right.

"It says, 'Post children.' Do we know them?"

"A low-level surveillance operation. A dead end. Two little nobodies."

"Oh?" She released her grasp and ran her index fingernail up his arm, tracing a bulging vein—then dug it into the crook of his elbow joint, breaking the skin, but not the blood vessel.

"Then why," she purred, "is it in your oh-so-important black-operations book?"

He fell to one knee and the impact sent a tremor through the sand. To his credit, however, he did not cry out in pain.

So Sealiah twisted her grasp—squishing vein and nerve bundle.

"A far-fetched clue," he grunted. "We thought it might lead to our long-missing cousin."

She released Uri. "Ah, yes, I recall. Something about a trust fund?"

"Yes, m'lady." Uri held the inside of his arm; a trickle of blood oozed and dripped upon the sand.

He stared at her navel and the emerald there; the glint of it reflected in his eyes. He coveted her power, of course; it was the way of her kind to

take whatever they had the strength to hold. But couple such a gaze with the obfuscation of these Post children . . . and she smelled treachery. It made her pulse pound with anticipation.

Uri looked away, his face burning.

Or perhaps, to her great disappointment, there was no conspiracy. Nothing on Uri's part but a moment of wishful thinking. What a pity that he would ever only be her faithful lapdog.

"What about them?" she asked.

"We intercepted a money transfer from what we thought an old double-blind account of Louis's. We were able to trace the originator of the transfer: a lawyer's office in central California. I retrieved the pertinent files personally. Trust fund for two children. It is unrelated to our case."

Uri reached deep into his windbreaker and drew out a slim laptop computer. He opened it, turned it on, and presented it to Sealiah.

She sat, waiting for the file to open.

Uri rifled again through his jacket, deeper, losing his entire right arm into its folds, and removed a card table, which he set up and placed before her.

She set the computer on the table. On-screen, two high-resolution scans appeared. A boy. A girl.

They had smiles as if someone had a knife at their backs and had forced them to grin. Siblings obviously. Possibly twins.

Uri fumbled about within his windbreaker, and there was the clink of ice in crystal and the slosh of liquor. He set a Bloody Mary on the table.

Sealiah took it and sucked the salt off the rim.

"There was only one minor complication," Uri admitted. "A Driver appeared at the same office. I made sure these files were destroyed before he got there . . . but still, the coincidence is interesting."

"Driver," Sealiah whispered. "What would a Driver be doing fumbling about on this matter?"

"He could not. If I understand the pact correctly, they are not allowed to interfere with our affairs. As we cannot theirs. As I said, a mere coincidence."

"Indeed . . ."

She looked again at the children. There was something familiar.

Sealiah increased magnification on the boy's eyes. Mixed in with the swirls of gray, blue, and green, a hint of nobility was reflected in the windows of his soul.

She returned to normal magnification and squinted so her acute vision blurred.

Yes, the boy's eyes, the slender but strong bridge of the girl's nose, the high cheekbones and arching brows on both. How could she have missed it? Whoever had camouflaged them had done a masterful job: they had transformed divine into dull.

She looked up and pinned Uri with a hard stare. "And is there any update on the whereabouts of Louis Piper?"

"Nothing after the last sighting in Albuquerque. He was living in a cardboard box."

"Yes . . ." She traced her fingernail over the girl's strong chin. There was something else about these children. Something *not* connected to Louis, but an influence just as powerful.

They were *not* two little nobodies. These two were definitely involved, and possibly of great value.

"Is he connected to this?" Uri moved to get a better look at the computer screen.

It was an outside, remote, astronomically distant possibility. But when any such possibility was the only one that accounted for the known circumstances—a boy and a girl that bore no small resemblance to the man who had been her most powerful adversary, and a Driver who worked for those wielding power equal to her own—such things could simply not be ignored.

Nor could such a possibility be confronted alone.

"Summon the Board of Directors."

"I'm sorry, m'lady," Uri said, coughing a slight chuckle. "For a moment I thought you said 'summon the Board.'"

She narrowed her green eyes to slits and looked deep into his so there could be no miscommunication. "That is precisely what I ordered."

Uri backed away three paces. "I shall do as you command, as ever, but I remind you that the Board will demand tribute if so summoned by a non-Director."

"Yes, and you will see to that personally."

Uri bowed so she could not see his face, but Sealiah nonetheless sensed his apprehension.

"It shall be as you say. And the children?"

"Find them," she said. "Shadow them. Report to me the moment you see or hear anything."

Uri was as loyal as any of their kind could ever be. As tribute to the Board, he would be her eyes and ears to its inner workings . . . losing him, however, would be like cutting off a limb.

She had to send him, though. Whom else could she count on to double-deal and backstab on her behalf?

Meanwhile she had to prepare for the gathering of the Board. There were weapons to sharpen and armor to mend.

She looked back at the smiling children on the computer screen.

Indeed, one did not face one's brothers and sisters without taking careful precautions against carnage and bloodshed.