

STEPHEN
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AND THE

ELEMENTALS

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CHAPTER 1

For a moment, all Stephen could see were those hideous eyes. Enormous, black, and ominous, they held his gaze and kept him frozen, motionless. They looked so real and yet something seemed artificial about them. From edge to edge, the eyes were all pupil, wet and glossy. Waves of tiny black pebbles rippled across their surface like rows of falling dominoes. The waves created mesmerizing patterns that seemed to communicate something, but what?

A scraping noise startled him. Four feet to his left, a creature hooked its claws into a crevice. The other arm was dangling at the creature's side while it stared at Stephen. Or was it staring at something else? Without the contrast of white surrounding the pupil it was hard to tell. No matter how much he tried, Stephen couldn't look away. The thought of it terrified him.

Stephen clung to the cliff and trembled, waiting for the touch. It came. It startled him just like it always did. He jerked his head to look below. From a dizzying altitude he saw that one creature had reached his feet. Several more were scaling up the cliff, approaching him from an endless pit. The sheer height from which he clung made him swallow hard, but it was the creatures' milky white skin that made him queasy. The purple veins in their bodies cast appalling streaks of color against a pale background. Then there were the patches of stones: rock-like protrusions that appeared in groupings in their cheeks and along their forearms like armor. Stephen was afraid that if he touched them his skin would slide off his bones while acid burned through his flesh. Yes, he wanted to look away. Even more he wanted to hide.

Mom! he thought.

She was close. In his fear, Stephen had forgotten that she too struggled to keep a grip on the shallow recesses of the cliff. Her long, black hair covered one eye and the other was wide open and focused on the creature approaching her son. Stephen sensed her fear. He was sure she was distraught over his safety. Why wouldn't she be? He was only twelve, and he knew one thing for certain: she would never run. Not until he was safe. If he could just reach her, maybe they could climb, or jump to the safety of a ledge.

He tried to shift. Something grasped his ankle. A hand? He realized he couldn't move his foot. Another pale, bony hand reached up to grab him—then another. Long fingers and claws wrapped around his legs. More creatures reached him by the second. From the endless depths they kept coming and clawing at him wildly, desperately, the pasty skin of their bodies inching closer. A creature climbed to his right side and Stephen's eyes followed it. As he surveyed its features, he stopped breathing.

2 The creature opened its mouth. Stephen could see its thick,

yellowed teeth. The stones embedded in its skin appeared to pulse in a steady cadence.



The creatures climbed over each other to reach him. There were so many arms and legs he couldn't count them. Stephen's sandy brown hair was dripping with sweat. He felt as though he were an inch away from a white-hot furnace. Coarse claws raked his cheek. Stephen went rigid. Was his mother okay? Were they touching her too? He couldn't see. The creatures blocked his view.

His mother screamed and instinctively he reached out in the direction of the sound. The rock beneath his feet crumbled and Stephen lost his footing. His stomach sank when he realized the creatures had released their grip. He plummeted backwards into the depths of the cavern. The figure of his mother, still clinging for her life, shrank to the size of a speck on the cliff now far above

him. He closed his eyes and braced himself for impact. When would it come? What would death be like? Was there time to ask God to forgive his sins?

A million images played in his mind—memories of his mother, father, and sister, JC. He now regretted all the fights he'd had with JC, and all the names he had called her in anger or in teasing. Now he would never see her again, and his mother—those horrid creatures would soon reach her, and she too would surely fall to her death.

“Mom!” he screamed, but she couldn't hear him. He would never hear her voice again. “Mom!”

“Aaaah! Wha? Stephen, what's wrong?”

Stephen sprung to a sitting position, shaking uncontrollably. He recognized his best friend's voice, but couldn't see him in the dark. A few seconds was all it took for Stephen to realize that he'd had the nightmare again.

“You okay?” Mason asked.

“Yeah, I'm okay. I just had a bad dream, that's all.”

“Was it the monsters again?”

“Yeah,” Stephen said. “They're so scary, so ugly—they were coming after us.”

Mason lowered his voice. “You were calling for your mom.”

The door opened, and light poured into Stephen's bedroom from the hallway.

“You okay, Stephen?”

He squinted at the door where Warren Carter peered in. “Yeah, Dad, I'm fine.”

“Can I get you a glass of water?”

Stephen pulled his knees toward his chest and looked away. “No, I'm fine, Dad. Really. You can go back to bed.”

“Okay, Stephen. Let me know if you need anything.” His dad closed the door.

For some reason his dad hadn't pushed the subject any further, and Stephen let out a deep breath.

"Must have been some dream," Mason whispered in the darkness.

"You asked me if it was the monsters again, Mace. I never told you about my dreams."

"Oh... well, nightmares are usually about monsters, right?"

"My dad told you, didn't he?"

There was a long pause, and then Mason said again, "You were calling for your mother."

"I know."

"Was she in the dream?"

Stephen thought for a moment. Until recently, he'd only had fond memories of his mother. He had thought of her almost every day since her death two years ago. Why was she in these nightmares? He didn't like seeing her with a terrified look on her face, and for some reason her image was more vivid in his nightmares than in his daydreams. It saddened him deeply.

"So far, she's been in every one."

"Stephen, I need to tell you something. Promise me you won't be mad, okay?"

Stephen lay down and laced his hands together behind his head. He sensed what Mason was going to say. "Okay."

"Your dad wants to send you to a doctor."

Stephen leaned on one elbow. "He told you that?"

"Yeah, he thinks you need to see a *shrink* about your dreams."

Stephen's heart raced. "Crap. I knew it. He thinks I'm crazy, doesn't he?"

"No," Mason assured him. "He just thinks you miss your mom really bad and that's what's causing the dreams."

"That's not it. It's got nothing to do with my mom."

"You said you wouldn't get mad."

"I'm not mad—not at you, anyway. What else did he say?"

“Not much, he just thinks you need to keep busy and be with friends.”

Stephen reached out toward the nightstand. A second later a familiar whoosh could be heard. He placed his inhaler back where he got it.

“So that’s why he told me to invite you to spend the night. It’s not usually his idea.” Stephen’s voice went back to a whisper. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Yeah, I think you’re a freaking lunatic, but I’ve always thought that.”

There was no response.

“Hey, you know I’m just kidding, right?”

Silence.

“Look, Stephen, I don’t think we’d be best friends if you were crazy.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, maybe I’m just starting to go crazy, and as soon as you’re sure of it, you won’t want to hang out anymore.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Yeah, how come?”

“They’re just dreams, Stephen; you don’t act crazy during the day. I wouldn’t have even known about this if you’re dad hadn’t said something.”

“I know. That’s what makes me mad. I wonder who else he told. If this gets back to school, everyone will call me crazy even if I’m not.”

“You should talk to him. Just tell him he’s gonna ruin your life if he’s not careful.”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to him,” Stephen said.

Mason changed the subject. “So who’s coming over tomorrow to witness your world record?”

“Just you so far. I need one more person.”

“What about Owen?”

Stephen paused. “I think Owen is tired of watching. He doesn’t think I can break *any* world record. He says they’ve all been broken too many times to break again.”

“What about JC?”

“No, the last thing we need is my little sister hanging around.”

The thought of falling to his death in the dream, and how he had wished he hadn’t fought so much with Jasmine, was still fresh. Once again, he felt regret.

“Well, she can watch, but we’re going to ditch her when we go to Hawkins Mine. It’s no place for little girls.” Stephen paused for a moment. “Hey, I got it, I’ll ask Tony—he’ll come.”

Mason said, “You’d think a senior would have better things to do than watch you hang spoons on your face.”

Stephen couldn’t tell if the comment was laced with sarcasm or jealousy, but it was one or the other for sure.

“Oh, he does,” Stephen said. “He’s got lots of important things to do. He’s got a girlfriend and everything. But he’ll come.”

Stephen was calm now. Mason scooted into his sleeping bag and said, “Well, let’s get some sleep. I’m tired.”

Stephen lay down and turned on his side. He couldn’t remember ever having nightmares when he slept on his side. As the boys drifted off to sleep, neither paid attention to how the blinds created a pattern of moonlit stripes on the wall. Nor did they see the shadow of the small, ominous figure peering through the window.

CHAPTER 2

A front-porch view of the Rocky Mountains wasn't so unusual for the residents of Leadville, Colorado. On this crisp, sunny morning the horizon looked like a photograph, something one might see on a drugstore postcard. The 14,000-foot peaks were still snow-capped. It was a sight Stephen Carter hardly noticed. After all, it was the only scenery he had ever known.

Spring was more than half over. Summer vacation was only a few weeks away. Stephen liked school, but he was ready for summer. He was ready to take a break from the likes of Jake Sorros and his jock-itch friends. For the past three weeks they had been taunting him relentlessly because his father wouldn't let him play on the summer league for the seventh- and eighth-grade baseball team. Stephen could hit a baseball farther than

anyone in his class, and he was fast too. But running was also his greatest weakness.

Asthma had plagued Stephen for as long as he could remember. Even a short sprint would leave him gasping for breath. He never left the house without his inhaler. It was a constant blow to Stephen's ego to have all the talents of an athlete but none of the stamina. He and his friends rode their bikes everywhere, but they had to stop often so Stephen could catch his breath. The same affliction kept him from playing baseball during lunch recess.

Stephen resigned himself to being a pinch hitter. He would hit the ball and run to first base. If he was safe, another boy would take his place as the runner. It was better than not playing at all. The only redeeming factor was that he wasn't the last kid picked when choosing teams. After all, everyone loves a hitter, except of course, for Jake Sorros and his jock-itch friends. Stephen could do nothing right in their eyes. After two years of enduring their ridicule, Stephen found himself clenching his fists at just the mention of their names. But they weren't around to mock him about his asthma this morning. Today, Jake Sorros was the last thing on Stephen's mind. He had a Guinness World Record to break.

On the porch railing Stephen arranged the last of seventeen spoons. He had borrowed many of them from Tony and Mason. "There. Now, all we have to do is wait for Tony to show up."

"You really don't need to lay them out, Stephen; I could hold them and just hand them to you one at a time."

Stephen looked at Mason squarely in the eyes. "Is that allowed? I don't want to be disqualified."

"You only need to beat the record. No one ever said you couldn't be handed the spoons."

Stephen thought about it. Sure enough, the Guinness Book of World Records never mentioned anything about how the

current record holder won, only that he balanced sixteen spoons on his face, beating the old record by one spoon.

“That’s a good idea,” Stephen said. “Now I won’t have to look down at the railing to get them; I can keep my head up straight.” He scooped the spoons into a bundle and handed them over.

“Think you can do it?” Mason asked.

“I don’t know. I wish my forehead was bigger.”

“No way. You’re ugly enough as it is.”

“No, really, even the kid who beat the world record said he wished his forehead was bigger. He said he ran out of room to hang more spoons.”

“Don’t worry, Stephen, you’re a butthead. You ought to have twice the room you need to beat the record.”

Stephen frowned. “You know what, Mace? I’m getting pretty tired of your comments lately. Maybe you should go home.”

Mason lost his smile. “Hey, I’m sorry—I didn’t mean it. I just—”

The screen door flung open and JC stepped onto the front porch holding a sheet of paper. “So this is the guy you gotta beat, huh?”

JC was dressed in her better denim overalls. Unlike her favorite pair, there wasn’t a single hole in them. Her dark hair was tucked up under a navy blue baseball hat she wore backwards. From the looks of it, her father must have snuck her clothes into the laundry. The lack of dirt was noticeable.

Mason shifted the spoons into one hand and snatched the paper from JC with the other.

“Let me see that.”

Printed on the sheet of paper was a photo of the nine-year-old record holder. He was balancing sixteen spoons on his face.

Stephen’s eyes turned to slits. “Did you get that from my room?”

JC’s eyes widened. “No.”

“Then where’d you get it?”

“I printed it off the Internet.”

Stephen could always tell when JC was lying and this was one of those times. “Dad told you to stay out of my room.”

“I told you, I wasn’t in your room!”

“Stephen,” Mason interrupted, pointing at the photo, “is this what you’re gonna try?”

“Well, yeah.” Stephen’s eyebrows arched. He could sense doubt in his best friend’s voice. “I told you what I was going to do.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the same as seeing it. This looks impossible.”

Stephen stepped beside his friend and looked at the photo he had been studying for weeks. It did look impossible. He had memorized the placement of each spoon. There were five on the boy’s forehead, two on each cheekbone, one on each ear, two on his upper lip, two on his chin, and one on his nose. Stephen figured out that the only way to beat him was to get six spoons on his forehead and match everything else. It was a good plan.

“Yeah,” JC said, “and a nine-year-old boy did it. How does it feel to be beaten by a kid my age?”

“Nobody *beat* me at anything, *half-pint!* That kid just tried it first, that’s all. Now why don’t you go inside and play with your dollies.”

Stephen was quick, but he didn’t expect what happened next. JC reared back and kicked him as hard as she could in the shin. Stephen shrieked and brought his knee to his chest. He gritted his teeth and massaged his aching shin. Then he took two steps to the end of the porch and yelled at JC, who had already run to the neighbor’s property line.

“You better run, half-pint—you’d better keep on running!”

JC was smiling at Stephen. She probably thought she was too far away for him to notice, but he saw it just the same. When she turned to run, she ran smack into Tony Caruso.

“Whoa, JC, where’s the fire?”

“It’s Stephen. He’s being mean to me again. I need to get out of Dodge.”

Tony knew that JC was usually the one who started trouble between them, but like everyone else, he tried to ignore it. “Get out of Dodge?”

“Yeah, that means ‘get away fast.’ ”

Tony nodded. “Are you two fighting again? If I had a brother or sister, I would never fight with them. You two don’t know how lucky you are to have each other.”

“I know,” said JC. “He’s the one who doesn’t.”

“I see,” Tony said seriously. “Do you want me to have a talk with him?”

“No, he wouldn’t understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That I don’t want to play with dolls—that I’m old enough to play the games he plays.”

Tony pressed his lips together. He struggled for some nugget of wisdom to share with her, but it didn’t come. “Well, maybe I’ll mention it to him, okay?”

JC started walking down the street. “Won’t do any good—my dad says he’s stubborn.”

Stephen saw Tony’s smile broaden as though he had found her amusing. The residents of Leadville must have found her amusing too. Many of them would stop her on occasion in hopes of hearing one of her unpredictable quips. Her tomboy personality didn’t sit too well with Stephen. The peer pressure from his friends to ditch her was overwhelming. The boys simply didn’t want a girl tagging along. Stephen was constantly searching for someone her own age to be her friend, but JC would have none of it. Girls her age played with dolls. Boys her age hated girls. Stephen knew JC idolized him. He knew that she thought he led an exciting life. She loved his friends, except for Nilus, but Stephen made it clear she wasn’t welcome.

Tony watched JC skip down the street. He cut across Stephen's dirt yard, avoiding the rocks and crevices that were normal to the region. At least the Carters had planted some shrubs. Most yards had no landscaping at all, just dirt and rocks. This was gold mining country. The color green was mostly relegated to evergreen trees.

Stephen watched Tony approach his house. In a few weeks, Tony would graduate from Lake County High School. He had just received the news that he had been awarded a full college scholarship to play baseball. Stephen admired Tony and the Carters often went to his high school games to watch him pitch. Tony had been working with Stephen on his baseball swing. His efforts had been rewarded. Stephen could crush a baseball, and once in a while he hit one out of the park. Not bad for a twelve-year-old. JC could pound a ball too. She had watched most of their practices, and one day Tony pitched a few balls to her. He was expecting very little, but if it weren't for his quick reflexes, he'd have caught JC's ball in his gut instead of in his glove. Talent for baseball ran in the Carter family.

At the end of the summer, Tony would leave for college, and Stephen would lose a best friend. Technically, Mason was Stephen's best friend. At least they spent most waking moments together. But Stephen idolized Tony, and Mason knew it.

Tony reached the Carters' front porch to find Stephen sitting on the top step rubbing his shin.

"Your sister do that to you?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, if she weren't a girl I'd punch her in the face."

"Why do you two fight so much? Don't you know how lucky you are to have a little sister?"

"I prefer having a little brother," Mason said. "When he does something stupid, I just twist his arm till he goes home."

Stephen looked at Mason. “Hey, Mace, why don’t you tell Tony how much fun it is having JC around?”

Mason rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Well, let’s see, she has a big mouth, likes to argue, she’s definitely a tomboy, and she embarrasses us in front of our friends—but then again, so does Stephen.”

Mason’s smile was cut short by a glare from Stephen. Mason looked down and kicked an ant off the porch floor with his shoe. Tony climbed the steps and stood beside Stephen.

“I’d give anything to have a sister like JC.” Tony said it with such sincerity that Stephen didn’t know how to respond. The silence was Mason’s cue. He held out the photo of the spoon boy.

“Hey, Tony, do you think Stephen can do this?”

A smile spread to the edges of Tony’s face. “Stephen, is this the record you plan to break today?”

“Yeah, and I know—it looks hard.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a record worth breaking if it wasn’t hard.” Tony stared at the photo, counting. “Sixteen spoons, huh? How many have you done—what’s your personal best?”

“Twelve.” As he heard himself say the number, Stephen suddenly felt warm. He wondered if his cheeks had turned pink.

What the heck am I doing? he thought. Twelve spoons aren’t even close to the record. I’m not ready for this.

“Maybe—ah—I think I should wait a month or two. Maybe until I can balance sixteen spoons real good, then I can try for seventeen.”

Stephen sensed something move from the corner of his eye. A rabbit had run up close to the porch. It reeled back on its hind legs for a moment, something Stephen had never seen a rabbit do before. And then it just sat still and stared at him.

That’s weird. That rabbit’s looking right at me.

There was nothing threatening about the rabbit, but it sent a chill down Stephen’s spine.

Tony patted Stephen on the back. “C’mon, Stephen, you can do it. At least give it a shot. If you can’t do it today, we’ll try again in a few weeks.”

Mason opened his mouth and huffed on a spoon. His breath steamed its shiny surface before he hung it on his nose.

“See, Tony, anyone can do it.”

Stephen rolled his eyes. “Go ahead, Mace, try the rest of them.”

Mason snickered and wiped the spoon on his T-shirt. “No, this is your trick.” Then he held it out and Stephen reluctantly took it. Stephen glanced over Mason’s shoulder. The rabbit was still staring at him. Something about the rabbit’s eyes seemed familiar, but that was impossible. It made Stephen shudder. He planted his feet firmly and turned so he could see his reflection in the living room window. He huffed on the first spoon, reached across his face, and hung it on his left ear. It stuck. He did the same to his right ear, and then hung a spoon on each side of his chin. Then he went back to the left side of his face, but higher. After steaming them, he planted two spoons on his upper cheek. Things were going perfectly.

A thought interrupted Stephen. *Is that rabbit still there?* He wondered why it mattered to him. So what if it is? Who cares?

One of the spoons on the right side of his cheek fell and clanged to the porch floor. Stephen had learned from practice not to move suddenly when a spoon fell; otherwise, the rest would follow. He gently took another spoon from Mason, huffed, and tried again. As he attempted to release it, he could feel the spoon slipping. He held it to his mouth and huffed twice, but it didn’t help. It wasn’t going to stay. Stephen kept trying, but it seemed as if no amount of moisture was going to make it stick. He’d never had this much difficulty before. Normally the right side of his face was much easier to work with than the left. After a few minutes of unsuccessful attempts, it seemed as though it would

stick if he released it. He let go. The spoon clanged obnoxiously louder than the first.

“Don’t sweat it, Stephen, you’ll get it.” Tony was always reassuring. It was one of the things Stephen liked most about him.

What’s that rabbit doing now? Stephen wondered. But really, what did it matter? And why couldn’t he stop thinking about it?

Jeez, it’s just a stupid rabbit. But the more Stephen thought about it, the more it bugged him. Something was very odd about that rabbit. He realized his heart was pumping hard and fast.

Take a deep breath... concentrate.

Mason was right on cue with the next spoon. Stephen tried it again. This time it stuck. In fact, it stuck really well. Stephen wondered if there might have been something wrong with the last spoon. With two spoons on each cheek, Stephen added two more above his upper lip. Those were always troublesome, but not today. Now came the difficult part. He needed to hang six spoons across his forehead before balancing the final spoon on his nose. Again, Stephen went to the left side of his forehead. He reversed the spoon so the cupped side faced out and placed it just millimeters from his hairline. It stuck like glue. So did the next five. If Stephen didn’t know better, he’d have sworn that he was magnetic. Each successive spoon adhered tightly to the patch of skin he laid it against. He should be euphoric, but something was wrong. He could feel pressure mounting where each spoon came in contact with his face. He wanted this to be over. The next spoon would put him over the top—break the world record, but he was concerned. The spoons pressed tighter against his face. Mason handed him the final spoon, and held his breath. Stephen hung it on his nose. His eyes crossed when he attempted to look at the spoon as it slightly flattened his nose against his face. Mason reached for his camera, but Stephen

didn't wait. He grabbed the spoon handles and yanked them all off his face.



“Hey, what’d you do that for?” Mason shouted. “I didn’t get a picture of it. How are you going to prove that you beat the record?” Stephen grabbed the final two spoons from his ears and let them drop to the floor. His eyes were wide and round and he stuttered to answer Mason.

“I—I have witnesses,” Stephen said. “That’s all I need—witnesses.” He said it fast, and his eyes darted between Mason and Tony. A cool spring breeze swept across the front porch. That’s what made it so unusual for the beads of sweat forming on Stephen’s upper lip.

“Are you all right?” Tony asked. “You’re as white as a sheet—what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Stephen answered, rubbing his face briskly. He lightly stroked the points where the spoons had touched his skin. Mason gave Tony a quizzical look, and shrugged. Stephen

went to the porch rail and peered off the edge. The rabbit looked him straight in the eyes before flitting off in the direction of Tony's house.

"I need my inhaler." Having said that, Stephen spun around and darted into the house.

"What was that all about?" Tony asked.

Mason didn't answer right away. He stared at the screen door that had slammed shut behind Stephen. Stephen was his best friend and friends protected each other. They didn't divulge secrets, especially secrets that could make someone look crazy. But Tony was different. He was older, but he wasn't a grown-up. Tony had lost his mother when she gave birth to him. When Stephen's mother died two years ago, Tony felt an instant kinship with him. He spent time with him, kept him busy, mostly working on his baseball swing. It was easy to do, since he lived only one house from the Carters. Tony was the closest thing Stephen ever had to a big brother, but more importantly, they were friends. Mason sometimes was a little jealous. There was something in their relationship that he would never have with Stephen.

"If I tell you, Tony, you can't tell another soul, okay?"

Tony's concerned expression immediately deepened. "Okay, I won't... what is it?"

"Well, Stephen's been acting a little strange lately. He's been having nightmares—really bad ones about monsters attacking him and his mom."

"His mom?"

"Yeah. Mr. Carter thinks he needs to see a psychiatrist. He says the nightmares are getting worse. Yesterday, he invited me over to spend the night so I could get Stephen's mind off whatever is bothering him. It didn't work so well, 'cause he had a pretty bad nightmare last night."

“Listen, Mason,” Tony said, “I think you should go in and keep Stephen company. I’ll find a way to get him talking about the nightmares later. Meanwhile, tell him I said congratulations on breaking the world record. Tell him I’ll sign his log book.”

“Log book?”

“Yeah, doesn’t he have an official log book, you know, from the Guinness Book of World Records organization?”

Mason’s lips became thin as he thought about it. “Nope, I don’t think he has one.”

“Aw, crap,” Tony said. “I just remembered something else. It takes two adult witnesses to sign the log book. They need to be respected citizens in the community, and they can’t be friends or relatives. I wish I’d remembered that earlier.”

“That’s okay, Tony. Stephen can do it again. He dropped a couple of spoons, but when you think about it, he made it look pretty easy.”

Tony stood up straight. His face shed some of the concern it had shown before, and then he broke into a full smile.

“You’re right; he really did make it look easy.”

As Tony walked next door, Mason went into the Carter house and yelled for Stephen. A faint voice replied, “I’m up here.”

Mason took the steps two at a time, and then pushed through the bedroom door. Stephen was sitting on the edge of the bed. He still looked frightened.

“Did you see what happened?”

Mason’s jaw dropped slightly and his eyes squinted.

“Yeah, I just saw you break the world record for hanging spoons on your face. Why are you acting so weird about it?”

“Cause it wasn’t me! Those spoons stuck to my face all by themselves.”

“What are you talking about? You dropped two of them. And besides that, I handed you the spoons—they didn’t have anything sticky on them. You did it fair and square.”

Stephen stood up. He was struggling for the right words to explain. He took a few steps and plopped down in his desk chair.

“I guess you didn’t see it then,” he said softly.

“See what?” Mason asked. “I saw everything. I was there, remember?”

Stephen thought about the nightmare last night, about how his dad wanted him to see a psychiatrist.

I’m not crazy, he thought, and I’m not going to let Mason think I’m crazy either.

“You’re right. It just went so smoothly that it seemed like the spoons were sticking all by themselves. I guess I was just surprised that it was so easy.”

“Yeah, well, just be glad it was easy, ’cause you’re going to have to do it all over again. We didn’t get a picture, and Tony says you need two grown-ups to sign an official log book.”

Stephen nodded absently and said, “Yeah, okay, we’ll have to get one.” He caught Mason giving him a careful stare. “What?”

“I don’t know,” Mason said. “I just thought you’d be happier to break the world record. It’s all you’ve talked about for weeks.”

“Yeah, I’m happy. But someone else will just break it again anyway. Hey, you wanna play catch?”

Mason cocked his head to one side and his eyes narrowed a bit. Then he looked at Stephen’s alarm clock. It wasn’t even ten o’clock.

Mason nodded and smiled. “Sure. I don’t have to be home until noon. Should we see if Tony wants to play?”

“No, just you and me. Let’s get our gloves.”

The two boys tromped down the stairs, picked up their gloves and headed for the empty lot down the street. Mason rambled

on about the Skyline Little League, and how the jock-itch clan had managed to keep him off their team, even though it was meant to be open to all kids. Stephen tried to look attentive and he nodded a lot, but he couldn't get his mind off the spoons... and that rabbit.

CHAPTER 3

There was plenty of room for the Carter family to eat at the kitchen table, but Warren Carter insisted they eat in the dining room. He always said, “That’s where families eat.” Julie Carter always set a formal table. She used her best china for Sunday dinners, which usually consisted of pot roast, potatoes and gravy, carrots, and homemade buttermilk biscuits. Stephen remembered those days before his mom got sick and sometimes he imagined her sitting in the empty chair across from his father. These days, Mr. Carter cooked the meals and the Carters still had pot roast on Sundays. The only difference was that the gravy came from a jar and the rolls from the grocery store, but otherwise, it was still a good meal and Stephen was happy to associate their Sunday dinners with a cherished memory of his mother.

Stephen and JC were responsible for doing the dishes. Stephen was the designated washer, and JC dried the dishes perched on a stool they kept in the pantry. Stephen's mom and dad had been discussing the purchase of a dishwasher just before she died. As much as Stephen hated doing dishes in the sink, he couldn't bring himself to ask his dad why he'd never purchased one.

Doing the dishes would be a simple chore tonight, because Saturday was hot dog night. Paper plates and plastic cups always made short work of it. Stephen's father watched as he took an oversized bite from his hot dog.

"You must be pretty hungry, Stephen—I mean, beating the world record and all."

Stephen looked miserable as he answered his father with a full mouth. "Yeah, I suppose so. Who told you?"

Mr. Carter glanced at JC and then back to Stephen.

"Mr. Caruso mentioned it. Well, you did beat the record, right?"

Stephen wasn't surprised that Tony had told his father.

He must have been proud of me, Stephen thought. But then I left without even thanking him for being a witness. Some friend I am.

"Yeah, I beat it."

"Well, you don't sound too excited about it. That's all you've talked about for a month now. Is something wrong?"

Stephen looked at his dad and saw that concerned expression on his face. His father was only thirty-eight, but he appeared much older when he got that look. He was tall and slender and had dishwater blonde hair like Stephen's, and a deep tan on his face from being outdoors a lot. Stephen figured he'd look just like his dad when he grew up. Stephen parked his hot dog by the other one on his plate. He had no intention of letting his dad's

concerns about him grow worse. He coaxed himself to smile and began rambling.

“You should have been there, Dad. It was awesome. I only dropped two spoons. I stuck the rest of them on the first try. But I guess it doesn’t count because I didn’t have two adults there and I didn’t get an official log book for them to sign.”

The lines of concern had melted away from Mr. Carter’s face.

“Well, that’s okay, son. Did you get a picture?”

“No, we forgot to take one.”

The look of concern was back.

JC giggled.

Stephen’s Dad furrowed his eyebrows. “You forgot? How’d you do that? You had everything so carefully planned. And you didn’t know that you needed two adults as witnesses?”

Stephen bit his cheek. “I guess I was in too big a hurry, but like I said, it doesn’t count anyway. We’re going to do it again next weekend.”

“Well,” Mr. Carter said, “I’ll make it a point to be here to see it. After all, it’s not every day your son breaks a world record.”

Great, that’s all I need, Stephen thought. What if I can’t make them stick like they did today? What then? Those spoons were pressing against my face. I need to find different spoons. At least that stupid rabbit won’t be around to distract me.

“Bet you can’t do it again, Stephen.”

Stephen shot a nasty glance across the table. “Bet I can, half-pint!”

“I’ll bet you a dollar.”

There was no mistaking Mr. Carter’s current expression. “We don’t bet, JC, especially for money. Stephen, you should know better than that.”

“Let me bet her just once, Dad... just to teach her a lesson.”

“We don’t bet and that’s final!” Now that his dad’s tone matched his expression, Stephen thought it best to change the subject.

“Dad, I know why you invited Mason to spend the night last night.”

Stephen’s father closed his eyes for a second, and then gave Stephen an apologetic look. “Are you mad at me?”

“Kind of—I mean, I don’t need a psychiatrist. I’m not crazy.”

“No one said you were crazy, son. And if Mason told you I was going to send you to a psychiatrist, well, he was just plain wrong. But I thought maybe you’d be interested in talking to someone—maybe a therapist. Sometimes people will talk to a therapist just to get things off their chest. A lot of people do it because it makes them feel better.”

“Do you know what would make me feel better?”

“No—what?”

“If you wouldn’t tell anyone else about my nightmares.” Stephen looked up at his father with pleading eyes. “I know they’ll go away soon, I promise.”

Stephen’s father looked down at his plate. He appeared remorseful, as though he’d just realized how much he had embarrassed his son, unintentional as it was.

“It’s okay, Dad. Mason doesn’t think I’m crazy. I—I just don’t want anyone else to know.”

“Does having bad dreams mean you’re crazy?” JC asked.

Stephen rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You don’t listen very good, half-pint.”

“That’s enough,” Warren said softly. “This is a difficult concept for a little girl to understand. Perhaps we shouldn’t talk about it at the table.” He looked at JC, whose blue eyes looked puzzled under her arched eyebrows. “It’s perfectly normal to have nightmares, honey, but sometimes if they keep coming back, it’s nice to have someone to talk to about them.”

“I had three bad dreams about tornados. Should I talk to someone too?”

“No. Neither of you need to talk to anyone—yet. We’ll give this some more time and see what happens.”

Stephen took a deep breath and exhaled. “Thanks, Dad.”

Stephen’s dad simply nodded.

* * *

After Sunday morning services, the Carters stopped at the bakery for breakfast. JC complained the entire time about the dress her father made her wear. She said, “Even Cynthia Thompson wouldn’t wear such a girly dress.” She tugged and rearranged it throughout their meal. Stephen knew how uncomfortable JC was in frilly clothes. He just smiled.

Stephen’s dad said he was going to take them to Old Man Hawkins Mine for about an hour. He asked Stephen if he would play catch with JC to keep her busy.

“Can we stop at home first?” asked JC. “I can’t play catch in this dress.”

Stephen reached for another doughnut. “You could if you were any good, half-pint.”

“I’m as good as you are, Stephen!”

Stephen’s dad crouched in his chair. “Hey, you two... we’re in a public place. Do you think you can be civil to each other for a few minutes?”

There were a few moments of silence, and then JC asked her father, “Are you going inside the mine?”

“Yes, I just need to pack up some equipment. I won’t be long.”

“Can we go with you? We can help.”

“Sorry, Jasmine, you know how I feel about mines. They’re no place for kids.”

Stephen's dad didn't seem to notice JC's pout. His eyes lingered on Stephen, who ignored his father's stare and did his best to concentrate on his doughnut. During the past few months, his dad had repeatedly warned him about the dangers of playing in the mines. In a conversation Stephen overheard with one of the mine workers, his dad was doubtful that the boys would heed his warnings. Stephen knew that his dad had played in the mines as a boy. He wasn't sure if his grandfather had tried to discourage him, but he suspected he had. But the temptation was just too great. After all, there simply wasn't a more fascinating playground for kids—or a more dangerous one. And now that the Precious Metals Mining Company was reopening the mine, all the legends and folklore about Old Man Hawkins and his fortune were coming to life again.

The legendary mine had been abandoned since 1896 when Hawkins himself declared that there was no more gold in its caverns and shafts. Hawkins had mined more gold than any man in Colorado, but just six months after boarding up the mine, he disappeared. It was rumored that someone had murdered him for his fortune, but that he had already hidden his gold in a secret mine shaft. If that was true, the Precious Metals Mining Company would soon discover the gold. If it wasn't true, today's modern mining techniques still made Hawkins Mine a perfect candidate for reopening. Instead of miners digging with picks and shovels in dangerous shafts, earth movers would dig deep craters into the earth and the rock and soil would be ground to dust, and from the dust, gold would be processed and extracted in safe, above-ground laboratories and processing plants.

Stephen's dad had been conducting feasibility studies in the local mines for two years, and the results were overwhelmingly favorable for reopening several abandoned mines. The tests that were completed just this week were the most conclusive

of all. Stephen's dad hired a company to run an induced polarization survey. Stephen didn't understand what all the colored blotches and graphs in the reports meant. All he knew was that somehow, the test calculated the mine's full potential for yielding gold and silver. It estimated the amount of gold density across the depth and breadth of the site. His dad said the results were much better than his company had hoped for. If his father was right, he would earn a sizable bonus. Tomorrow, his team would begin to assess and map all of the existing caverns and shafts. The reason for this made Stephen sad. For safety reasons they would dynamite all of the underground shafts before beginning the task of surface mining.

After stopping home to allow Stephen and JC to change out of their Sunday clothes, the Carters went to the main entrance of the mine. It was another dry, warm day, and the sun seemed incredibly bright.

"You two be good," Stephen's dad said, pointing a finger. "If I'm not back in 45 minutes, call Louis." His dad handed his cell phone to Stephen.

"Will do, Dad," Stephen said. Stephen's dad had given him the same instructions a hundred times before. Whenever a worker went into the mine alone, they made certain someone had a cell phone with instructions to call for help if necessary. Louis Parker was # 2 on the speed dial.

Stephen watched his father disappear through the entrance of Hawkins Mine and then he walked JC to a level stretch of ground.

"High one!" Stephen yelled and he threw the baseball soaring into the sky. JC shaded her eyes from the sunlight with one hand, and took two steps to her right. The ball fell to earth and she held her glove high above her head. It made a solid "thunk" against the leather webbing of her glove.

“Grounder!” JC yelled, and she whipped the ball low against the ground. It took short, quick hops on the way to its target. Stephen didn’t have to move at all. He rarely did when he played catch with JC. She had a better arm than most of his friends. Stephen read the ball perfectly, and he lowered his glove within an inch of the ground and caught the ball mid-bounce. Without hesitation, he threw hard toward JC’s chest. She reached for the ball, caught it and threw another grounder. Again, Stephen lowered his glove. The trajectory was perfect, but the ball hit a rock on the last bounce. It took an unexpected hop to his left.

Aw crap, he thought as he turned to chase the ball. The level ground they were playing on wasn’t very long. The ball rolled over a ridge and began its descent downhill.

Might as well walk now—don’t want to get overworked. Stephen patted his back pocket and felt the familiar shape of his inhaler. He felt better just knowing it was there. The hill wasn’t too steep, but still, it was work to descend and climb again. As Stephen navigated the slope, he could hear JC in the distance saying, “You shoulda caught it.” A tinge of embarrassment crept into his thoughts.

As Stephen reached the halfway mark, he noticed something unusual. There was a small stream of water at the bottom of the hill. He had been playing on these grounds for years, and never once noticed a stream anywhere. As he approached it, he realized just how small it was, but it seemed to be moving with great force. He saw the baseball in the water. It was moving slowly up the hill.

Up the hill? How can that be? Stephen straddled the small stream and looked straight ahead. The grade was definitely going uphill. He looked behind him. The slope was slanting downhill. He watched the current of the water pushing the ball downstream, or upstream, or whatever it was. It just looked

unnatural. He plucked the ball out of the water and set it on dry ground. It rolled downhill for a few feet before plunking back into the stream. There was no doubt about it—the water was flowing uphill. Stephen just stared at it, watching his ball slowly creep up the hill, and suddenly the water supply stopped. The water ahead of him kept rushing up the hill, but there was no more behind it. The baseball rolled back down to him, through his legs and continued down the slope. Watching it, Stephen felt a chill down his spine. What had he just seen?

That's impossible, he thought, but I saw it. I need to tell Dad. But then he imagined what he would think if someone claimed they saw water run uphill. The word *crazy* came to mind. There shouldn't even be water on the grounds of this mining site. And then he thought about something else. *Dad already thinks I need to see a therapist. I'd need proof and the water has stopped running. I can't go talking like a crazy person.*

Stephen was still straddling the damp area where the water had flowed. It appeared to be drying fast. He looked up the hill and saw something move. Was there someone up there? He shaded his brow with his glove. The figure he thought he had seen was gone. Was someone watching him, and if so, why? He stared for another minute, but all he saw was the golden rock and soil he'd become accustomed to in this vast playground they called Hawkins Mine. He walked farther downhill and retrieved the ball. On the way up he turned around several times and faced the spot where he thought he'd seen someone or something move. And now he had the uncomfortable feeling he was being watched.

CHAPTER 4

Monday was a typical school day. The Carter children caught the school bus at 7:00 a.m. It first stopped at West Park Elementary School, which JC attended, and then went to Lake County Middle School, where Stephen departed the bus. He arrived in home room fifteen minutes early. The surrounding noise and commotion put him at ease. It was both familiar and comforting. He was tired. He'd had the nightmare again last night, but since he hadn't screamed, his father was unaware of it. And that's the way he wanted it to stay. The dream had been the same except for one thing: at the bottom of the cavern there was a stream of water running uphill. Stephen woke up before he hit bottom, but it was amazing to him that even in his dream he could see the stream's flow running the wrong direction.

Mason appeared in the doorway two minutes before the bell sounded. He made a beeline to Stephen's desk.

"Hey, Stephen, did you tell anyone yet?"

"Tell anyone what?"

"About your world record."

Stephen looked away and shook his head. "No, I haven't told anyone."

Mason patted Stephen on the back. "Don't worry buddy, I was there—I'll be your witness."

"Yeah, thanks, Mason."

The tardy bell rang, and Mrs. Swanson began taking attendance. When she called Mason's name, he said, "Here, Mrs. Swanson... Hey, can I tell you something cool?"

Mrs. Swanson looked at Mason with her usual expression, which said she was going to regret this moment.

"Very quickly, Mason."

"Stephen Carter broke a world record this weekend."

Stephen sank in his chair and every head in class turned to look at him. Mrs. Swanson spoke in a soft voice.

"Is this true, Stephen, did you break a world record?"

Stephen straightened slightly, "Well, sort of... I guess."

"That sounds exciting. What record did you break?" Mrs. Swanson asked, smiling.

Mason interrupted. "He hung seventeen spoons on his face, Mrs. Swanson. I'm a witness, I was there."

A few of the kids laughed, and Stephen could see Jake Sorros three rows over, craning his neck to see him.

Uh oh, here it comes, he thought.

"Hey, Stephen, that's a cool trick. It will come in real handy when you grow up to be a busboy."

Stephen could no longer see him, but he recognized Jock-itch Jake's voice. The room exploded with laughter.

“Another word from you, Jake, and you’ll be spending the afternoon in detention,” Mrs. Swanson quipped. She turned back to Stephen. “That’s wonderful, Stephen. Will you get your name in the Book of Records?”

“No, ma’am—well, that is, I need to do it again. We were supposed to have two adults there—to sign a log book.”

Jock-itch was slapping his knee and laughing uncontrollably.

“That’s enough, Jake. You’ve just earned detention from three-thirty to five. And please excuse yourself to go to the principal’s office—NOW!” Mrs. Swanson stared Jake down, and he stopped laughing. He grabbed his books and left the room. He didn’t slam the door, but it closed loud enough to indicate he was mad—real mad.

Mrs. Swanson ran her fingers through her hair as though she had forgotten where she was for a moment. Then she looked at Stephen and said, “Stephen, I think it’s wonderful that you broke a world record—any record. I hope you’ll try again and get your name in the Book of World Records.”

“I will, Mrs. Swanson.” Stephen didn’t sound too convincing.

As Mrs. Swanson continued taking attendance, Stephen caught Mason’s eye. Mason smiled as though he was satisfied that Jock-itch got in trouble. But Stephen knew that wouldn’t be the end of it. There was no end to the trouble that Jake Sorros could stir up. And there was no doubt in Stephen’s mind that he would be on the receiving end of it.

* * *

Stephen’s class ate lunch at eleven-thirty each day. He was sitting with his friends at their regular table, and Mason had just

explained what had happened in home room to Owen Saunders and Nilus Baldwin. Stephen was the only one not laughing.

“I wish I could have seen it,” said Nilus. “Ol’ Jock-itch got a taste of his own medicine.”

Mason was still laughing. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mrs. Swanson so mad. I wonder if she called his parents.”

“I hope not,” Stephen replied. “It’ll just make things worse.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nilus. “It’s about time he got in trouble. The guy gets away with everything.”

Stephen shook his head. “I know, but you should have seen the look he gave me when he was leaving the room. I’ll probably have the whole football team after me now.”

Nilus grinned. “Baseball team, Stephen, they’re playing baseball now.”

“Whatever, Nilus—you know what I mean. Those guys love to embarrass us, and now they have another reason—as if they needed one.”

“What are you... scared of them?”

Stephen’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not scared of them, Nilus. I could beat Jake in a fair fight. The problem is, Jake always has a dozen guys with him. All he has to do is give the word and we’ll all be wearing our underwear around our ears. I’m tired of taking his crap. I just want to be left alone.”

“So you *are* scared!”

“I wasn’t scared of you when you picked a fight with me.”

Nilus turned pink. He had been coming to Leadville to stay with his grandmother for three summers before he and his mother moved to Leadville permanently. One summer he had picked a fight with Stephen at Turquoise Lake. Stephen tried to talk him out of it, but Nilus kept taunting him, calling him chicken. Stephen still wouldn’t fight even after Nilus shoved him. Because of his asthma, Stephen couldn’t fight for very long before he was out of

breath, but after the second shove, Stephen thrust his palm into Nilus's nose and broke it. The fight had ended in seconds. Stephen felt bad and led Nilus to the doctor's office on his bike. Soon after the fight, they became friends, but he often found himself trying to keep Nilus out of fights. Stephen's dad said Nilus would outgrow his need to fight. Stephen couldn't wait.

Owen chimed in. "Okay, nobody's scared, got it? Stephen just doesn't want any trouble, that's all. I mean, who needs it?"

Nilus rolled his eyes at Owen. "Well, at least Stephen doesn't need a ladder to punch Jock-itch Jake in the nose." Nilus laughed until he saw that Mason and Stephen were stone-faced, and then he rolled his eyes again. "Okay, sorry, Owen, no more short jokes." Stephen noticed that Nilus couldn't stop smiling. There was nothing Nilus loved more than teasing Owen about his height. He was barely taller than Stephen's sister, JC.

"What makes those guys think they're so special?" Stephen asked. "They aren't that smart, and they may be good athletes, but they're not great athletes."

"That's not what Jake's dad told my dad," Owen said. "He was bragging about how great Jake is, and how he could get a scholarship in any sport he wanted."

"Not basketball," Stephen said. "Have you seen him dribble? He's clumsy."

"That's not what his dad says. Anyway, you'd think these guys were Olympic stars or something. Too bad we don't have our own baseball team. We could probably kick their butts."

Nilus locked eyes with Owen. "You know, sometimes you get a halfway decent idea."

Stephen interrupted. "What? Are you serious?"

Nilus retracted his head like a snake getting ready to spring on its prey. "Of course I'm serious. Could there be any better

way to get back at those jock idiots than to humiliate them on the ball field?”

Stephen waved his hand in a gesture that said he had already dismissed the idea. “And who’s going to humiliate them—us? I know I said they aren’t great athletes, but they’re a whole lot better than we are.”

Nilus frowned. “We can get more players, guys. I’m telling you, they aren’t that good.”

Owen’s eyes lit up. There wasn’t a single sport he didn’t play exceptionally well, but his height deterred Coach Spellman from considering him as a serious athlete. Stephen could never figure out how a kid’s height could blind a coach from seeing his true potential, but it happened to lots of kids at school. Since second grade Owen had received very little playing time on the school teams. Even though he possessed twice the skills of most of the boys who made the team, he was always the one who had to sit on the bench. It was humiliating. But Stephen found Owen to be a good ball handler in basketball, and an outstanding fielder in baseball. He had a great arm, and height wasn’t nearly as important in baseball.

Nilus’s eyes had become sharp, almost piercing. “Do you think Tony would coach us, Stephen?”

Stephen shrugged and glanced at Mason, who had been quiet. “I don’t know. Do you guys really think this is a good idea?”

Mason didn’t possess the same level of skills or coordination as Stephen or Owen, but he was at least average, and baseball was his best sport.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” Mason said. “Even if we only gave them a good game, it would be worth it. It would embarrass them to death if they didn’t slaughter us. I think we should do it.”

Stephen sat up straight. “Wait a minute,” he said. “The Skyline League has been playing for five weeks already. You just can’t start a team at this point in the season. It’s already half over.”

Mason was quick with an answer. “We don’t have to be in the league, guys. Why don’t we just challenge them to a three-game tournament? You know, off the schedule. We’ll need a couple of weeks to practice anyway.”

The boys studied each other and there were smiles all around the table. Stephen was about to agree to it, but then his eyes fell to his food tray.

“My dad will never let me play. He’s too protective of me—stupid asthma.”

Mason stared at nothing in particular and said, “Hey, it’s only three games, Stephen. Maybe you can pinch-hit—just like you do at recess.”

“Maybe,” Stephen replied, “but my dad doesn’t know I pinch-hit at recess. Maybe you guys can come with me. We’ll talk him into it together.”

The boys agreed, and for the rest of the lunch hour, there was a spark in their eyes and smiles on their faces. Nothing in life could be better than beating the jock-itch boys at their own game. Nothing.

* * *

After dinner, Stephen washed the dishes in record time. He was sitting at the dining room table doing his Social Studies homework when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” he yelled, and he ran past his dad, who was reading the evening paper. When Stephen’s dad looked up, he was staring at three boys.

“Hi, Mr. Carter,” Mason said.

Stephen’s dad lowered the paper. “Hello Mason... Owen... Nilus. I’m surprised to see you boys out on a school night. What’s the occasion?”

Mason took the lead. “Well, Mr. Carter, we were thinking about forming our own baseball team and we thought... well, we thought Stephen might want to be on our team.”

“I see. So the three of you came over to convince me to let Stephen play?”

Mason instantly ran out of things to say. He managed to nod. Nilus was ready to take a stab at it. “It’s like this, Mr. Carter—we’re only gonna play three games, and we know Stephen can’t run very much, but he’s a good hitter, and so maybe he can play catcher, and pinch-hit once in a while.”

“Like he does at recess?”

In the silence, Stephen could almost hear his heart beat. His dad grinned at him.

“Yes, Stephen, I know that you play ball at recess. Mr. Anderson says you have an incredible swing. He also says you’ve never exerted yourself to the point where you needed your inhaler. That tells me that you understand how serious your condition is. If you can make me a promise that you’ll take the same precautions, I’ll allow you to play. But the first time you take a chance that puts your safety at risk, you’ll have to quit. Agreed?”

Stephen’s eyes moistened just enough to be noticeable, but he managed to fight off any tears. His face was solemn and he struggled with his response. “Agreed.”

The boys all thanked Mr. Carter, and he made it a point to remind them that Stephen’s asthma was chronic. He said they

need to look out for each other and told them that no game was worth placing someone's safety at risk. The boys celebrated by bumping knuckles and patting each other on the back. Stephen walked them out to the front porch.

"I can't believe it," Nilus said. "Your dad knew you were playing the whole time and never said a word."

"Yeah," Stephen said. "I think he knows we've been going to Hawkins Mine, too."

"Not for long," Owen said. "Pretty soon they'll dynamite the shafts and our chances of finding Hawkins's gold will be gone."

"We've got to go one last time, even if we don't find the gold. We won't have many chances to do it again. I'm going to miss that mine."

Stephen agreed with Nilus. "How about tomorrow after school? My dad has been working late the past two weeks."

Mason's smile disappeared. "I don't know, guys, the mine has been crawling with workers from the mining company. I think we're already through."

"No way," Stephen said. "Most of the workers leave by three. I say we go, and if there is anyone there, we'll go do something else."

The boys agreed. Stephen would drop JC off at the neighbors and they would go on one last treasure hunt, or maybe they would play cave monsters, or one of the other games they would surely miss in the coming weeks. At the very least, they would say farewell to the best playground in the world.

CHAPTER 5

The following morning on the school bus, Stephen unraveled his plan to JC. What he told her was mostly true, but he lied about where he planned to go after he dropped her off at Jenny Phelps's house. If JC knew he was going to Hawkins Mine, she'd likely blackmail him into taking her along. But working on a class geography project with Nilus didn't have the same allure. In comparison, going to Jenny Phelps's sounded almost palatable. JC didn't like Nilus as much as Owen and Mason, and Stephen considered that when he crafted his story. It worked.

Stephen was in a good mood. Most of the time, in fact, he seemed to have fewer cares than other kids his age. He liked school and he made friends easily. Not being allowed to play sports had an upside, too. Stephen poured himself into his studies. He concentrated on physics, chemistry, biology, and math. He

needed a strong background in these subjects if he wanted to be a geologist like his father. He wondered if he would someday work with Mason, who wanted to be a chemist. Although Stephen was smart, Mason had a better grasp of chemistry. Mason was years ahead of their class and was already attempting to read college texts on the subject.

The only problem that Stephen faced on a regular basis was dealing with the jock-itch clan. Stephen had coined the term to define the rotten-to-the-core group of athletes who thought they could do no wrong. The clan was comprised of the coach's favorite players. They got away with doing things that would get other kids expelled, and Coach Spellman was just as bad. He bullied the teachers into giving flunking players passing grades so they wouldn't miss a game. Stephen regarded it as cheating and it bothered him.

The jock-itch clan always found someone to pick on. Usually it was someone they regarded as a nerd. Stephen had actually managed to stay off their radar until late in the school year two years ago, when he defended Russ Brubaker. Jake Sorros had been teasing him in the hallway in front of a large group of kids. Stephen told him he should pick on someone his own size. Jock-itch approached Stephen until they were nose-to-nose. Stephen didn't flinch. In fact, he didn't even blink. Jock-itch told Stephen that he had just made his blacklist, and that he would *get his* when the time was right. From that moment forward, Jock-itch tormented Stephen, but only when he was surrounded by plenty of friends. They did his dirty work.

Stephen wasn't thinking about the jock-itch clan when he walked through the doorway of his home room. But that would soon change.

"Well, look who it is. Spoon Boy."

Jock-itch had a vengeful look on his face. His sneer was particularly nasty this morning. Stephen almost turned around and walked out of the room, but what difference would that make? There was no doubt that Jock-itch had arrived early on purpose, and if Stephen left the room, he'd be right behind him. He was trapped. Stephen looked at the clock—fifteen minutes until the bell rang. He needed to avoid a fight for at least five minutes if his home-room teacher arrived at her usual time. On either side of Jake was one of his jock-itch cronies, Tim Samson and Nate Ford. They were nearly as cruel as their leader. The school day was not starting well.

“What’s the matter, Jake, jealous that you can’t break a world record?” Stephen leaned toward Jake as he said it.

“Yeah, right. At least if I was going to break a record it would be for something a man would do.”

“Like what—picking on kids smaller than you? Does that make you feel like a man?”

“You looking for a fight, Spoon Boy?”

“I’ve got something better, Jock-itch.”

Jake raised his eyebrows. Stephen had never called him that name to his face.

“How about a real man’s challenge?”

“Go on, Spoon Boy, let’s hear it.”

“I’m putting a baseball team together. We want to challenge your team to a three-game tournament.”

“Is that right?” A nasty grin spread across Jake’s face. “You and what army?”

“My friends, Jock-itch, that’s who—and we think we can beat you and all your jock-itch buddies.”

One of Jake’s eyes twitched when Stephen used the word *jock-itch* the second time. It appeared to Stephen as if he had to compose himself to continue speaking. “That’s the funniest

thing I've ever heard. You can't even play ball, Carter. Your daddy won't let you because you have asthma."

"I can pinch-hit and play catcher, and my friends are a lot better than you think. In fact, maybe I'll have my little sister play, too. She can probably throw farther than you guys."

Nate Ford clenched his fists and took a step toward Stephen. Jake stretched his arm out to keep Nate back, and then he smiled and bobbed his head.

"So what happens if we beat you?"

"I'll do your homework for a week."

Jake scrunched his face, apparently unimpressed with Stephen's offer. "Two months."

Stephen's eyes narrowed. "A month."

"Deal! And although we know it will never happen, what would I have to do if we lost?"

"Not just you," Stephen said, "all of you. You need to leave everyone at school alone—no more bullying any of us, period!"

Jake burst into laughter. Samson and Ford exchanged glances, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey, Jake," Ford said, "if we gotta leave *all of them* alone, then *all of them* should have to do our homework for a month."

"Good point, Nate. What do you say, Carter? Deal?"

"I can't speak for everyone. I can only speak for me."

"So I guess you aren't so sure of your team after all, eh, Carter?"

Stephen's stomach knotted. These guys were just too cocky for their own good.

"It's a deal, Jake. But you guys have to leave us alone until the game."

"No problem, Spoon Boy. I'm going to enjoy having you do my homework for a whole month."

"Do you boys belong in this room?"

Stephen turned to see Mrs. Swanson staring down Samson and Ford.

“We were just on our way out, Mrs. Swanson.” Both of the boys gave Stephen a big grin on the way to the door. Jake went to his desk, and when Stephen turned around he saw Mason standing behind him.

“Stephen, what the hell. Oops. ” Mason grimaced and turned to see if Mrs. Swanson had heard him curse. Thankfully, she was watching Samson and Ford leave the room. Mason lowered his voice.

“You can’t bet for us. We didn’t agree to that.”

“I know,” Stephen whispered. “You can back out of the bet if you want.”

“Did he say he wouldn’t bother any of us until the game?”

“Yes.”

Mason clenched his jaw. “That alone might make it worth the gamble. Let’s wait and see what the others say.”

* * *

Stephen explained the bet to Owen and Nilus at lunch. Nilus didn’t hesitate to accept it, but Owen needed some persuading. Stephen knew just what to say to convince him.

“Just think of all the teams you didn’t make because of those guys, Owen. You’re a better player than half their team and you know it. The worst thing that could happen is that we give them a close game, right?”

“No,” said Owen, “the worst thing that could happen is that they slaughter us—and then we have to do their homework for a month.”

“So let’s not let it happen,” Nilus said. “Let’s kick their butts into the next county!”

Owen frowned. “That’s easy for you to say, but who says they won’t embarrass us? How do you think you’d feel if you had to do homework for one of those guys for a month?”

“Like crap,” Nilus said, “but even if that happened, who says we’d have to do A+ work?”

“Heck,” Mason said, “who says we’d have to do D+ work?”

Nilus had a broad smile. “Right. At least I’m willing to take a chance. I suppose your mommy will be keeping you in the house the day of the game, huh?”

“That’s enough,” interrupted Stephen. “Let’s vote.”

Stephen placed his hand flat on the table. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m tired of being picked on. If there’s even a chance we could get these jock-itch jerks off our backs, I’d like to give it a shot.” Stephen looked down at his hand. “Who’s with me?”

Nilus slapped his hand on top of Stephen’s. Mason’s followed. Owen looked at the three of them and shook his head. He stood still for a moment, and then he rolled his eyes and shook his head again. Finally, he stretched his arm out and placed his hand on Mason’s. He was in.

* * *

The bus ride home was long for JC. She listened to Jenny Phelps ramble off a list of things they could do for fun. They settled on watching the Disney Channel, a huge victory for JC considering the choices she had been given. Stephen walked the girls to Jenny’s door.

"I'll pick you up around six," Stephen said. JC rolled her eyes and followed Jenny into her house.

Stephen took off running for home and after a half block, decided he'd run far enough. He wasn't tired, but he never knew when he would have an asthma attack. The warning his dad often spoke played in his mind like a recorded message: "Better to err on the side of caution." When he arrived home, Stephen dropped off his books and went to the garage for his bike. A fanny pack was looped around the handlebars. He unzipped it and checked to see if his flashlight worked. It did. After closing the garage door, he mounted his bike and headed for Wild Bill's Hamburgers & Ice Cream. The best part about living in a small town was that nothing was very far away. Even Hawkins Mine was only six miles from downtown Leadville.

When he arrived at Wild Bill's, Mason, Owen, and Nilus were waiting outside, straddling their bikes.

"It's about time, Stephen. I was about ready to go inside and get something to eat."

"I didn't take that long, Nilus. Anyway, you knew I had to drop JC off."

"Whatever—let's get going. We don't have very much time."

Nilus led the way, and Owen fell in behind him. Stephen and Mason rode side by side.

Stephen yelled over to Mason, "What's up with Nilus?"

Keeping his eyes on the road, Mason grinned. "Owen told him that JC didn't like him very much."

"So why does he care? He doesn't like JC either."

"I don't know," Mason said, "but it sure put him in a bad mood."

Well, what do you know, Stephen thought, just when you don't think he has any feelings...

When the boys reached the edge of town they headed north on a county road. If they were going to be caught, this stretch

of road would be where it would happen. Until recently, there were rarely any cars on this road, but since Hawkins Mine was being reopened, there was occasional traffic. They arrived at the location where Stephen always stopped to rest. Owen steered to the side of the road, and Stephen and Mason did the same, but Nilus kept going.

“Hey, Nilus!” Owen yelled, but Nilus didn’t look back.

“All this because he found out JC doesn’t like him?” Stephen asked.

“Yeah,” Mason said. “He’s taking it pretty hard.”

Stephen looked at Owen. “So why’d you tell him anyway?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was mad at him for making fun of my height at lunch. I just wanted to get back at him a little—I didn’t think it would hurt his feelings this bad.”

“I don’t think Nilus cares two cents about JC,” Stephen said. “He just got his ego bruised, that’s all. God forbid there’s someone on this earth that doesn’t like him.” Stephen looked at Owen. “Maybe you should go on ahead. We’ll catch up with you in a few minutes.”

Owen agreed, and pedaled off.

“I hope this isn’t going to ruin our last trip to the mine,” Mason said.

Stephen sensed genuine concern in his voice. “Look, Mace, if Nilus wants to mope around, let him. I plan to have fun and you should, too. Besides, last time we were here I found a new hiding place, and I’ll bet you five bucks none of you can find me.”

“I thought we were going to look for Hawkins’s gold.”

“You know what? I don’t think Hawkins hid his gold in the mine. We’ve been looking for a couple of years now. My dad says the story is just an old wives’ tale.”

Stephen and Mason rested for a few minutes, and then continued on their way to the mine.

When they arrived, they hid their bikes in a narrow crevice near the mine's entrance, beside Nilus's and Owen's bikes. Owen was waiting at the mouth of the mine. It was littered with blinking lights and signs that read *Keep Out*, *Private Property*, and *Danger*. Nilus was nowhere in sight.

"So he went in without us, eh?" Stephen asked.

Owen shrugged. "I guess so—unless he's hiding out here somewhere."

Stephen looked in all directions. "Well, we only have about an hour and a half. Let's go."

The boys maneuvered around flashing roadblock signs and ducked under the yellow tape that was strung everywhere.

"Did they really think this would keep people out?" Owen asked.

Mason snorted. "Not a chance, but at least it looks official."

The boys laughed, and then three flashlights clicked on and they walked down the mine's main corridor. They trampled the existing footprints left by the mine workers. They were easily seen in the fine ocher dirt, but one trail stood out among the rest. Someone wearing tennis shoes, about a size 10, had gone down this path. Nilus, no doubt. About ninety feet down the path, they came to a fork and chose the left corridor. A hundred feet later, they made another left. Owen began to mimic the music played in the scary parts of the movie *Jaws*. Stephen ignored it and focused his attention on the odd shape of the corridor walls. They fascinated him.

The boys were now walking in what was the least explored of the corridors. The grade was slanted sharply downhill, and every once in a while the ceiling would come so low that their heads would scrape against it if they didn't crouch, or the corridor would widen or become very narrow. That's why they had originally decided not to explore this path. From a photo they had seen at the Leadville Mining Museum, they had thought it

was unlikely that Old Man Hawkins spent much time hunched over in this part of the mine. He had been a big man, enormous, in fact. But the more they had explored this section, the more they regretted their decision not to investigate this side of the mine first. It was far more interesting than the others. But in addition to their theory that Hawkins wouldn't have used it, Nilus was a big kid too. He didn't care for tight spaces. Stephen and Mason had to coax him into making their first expedition in these cramped pathways.

Last fall, on their third expedition into this part of the mine, they began to change their minds about whether or not Old Man Hawkins had come this way at all. Of course he had. Who else would have dug the passageways? But why had he carved these corridors so small when the others were so much bigger? Was Hawkins in a hurry, and, if so, why?

The boys finally came to the room. They were able to stand up straight in this eight-foot-diameter room. The walls were incredibly smooth and the room was perfectly square. How had Hawkins carved the room so perfectly, and why? A man in a hurry wouldn't have taken so much time to carve a perfect room out of rock. Owen had thought that maybe Old Man Hawkins stored supplies here, or that he used the space to sleep in or rest when he was tired. Stephen had found Owen's explanation plausible, but at this moment, it struck him that this room was an amazing feat of engineering. Stephen thought about telling his dad about the room—but then he would have to admit that he had disobeyed him and gone to the mine.

Stephen doubted they were on the right trail to find the Hawkins gold, but it no longer mattered; their time had run out. The boys stretched for a few minutes, and then Stephen approached the opening of the next passageway. He turned around and his eyes

lingered on the walls of the room before they continued on their journey. A chill ran down his spine.

A short distance from the room, the boys came upon another fork, and this time they entered the corridor on the right.

“Do you think he’s here?” Mason asked.

“Who, Nilus?” Stephen replied.

“No, Santa Claus. Who do you think?”

“Yeah—I keep expecting him to jump out of the shadows and scare the crap out of us.”

“Me too. I sure wish I could turn the tables on him. You know—scare him first.”

Just then, Stephen remembered his new hiding place. It was just up ahead.

The boys fought the urge to slow down even though this corridor was more difficult to navigate. They had to crouch as they walked the entire length of it. Despite the added acrobatics, Owen was now singing the song to the old TV Western series *Rawhide*. Funny, he’d never even seen the TV show, yet he knew all of those theme songs. How did he ever learn them? Sometimes Stephen found Owen’s constant babbling obnoxious, but not today. With Nilus missing from the group, it was tolerable. Mason must have felt the same because he hadn’t told Owen to shut up even once. They exited the corridor and stepped into a large, hollow area. They could stand up straight again.

Mason made some weird grunting noise as he stretched. “Which way, Stephen?”

They had never been beyond this point. They had descended to quite a depth, Stephen decided, because it was cold. He had meant to bring a jacket, but in his hurry to meet up with his friends, he’d forgotten it. The three boys shone their flashlights in all directions. There were four corridors, each resembling the opening to a cave.

What a shame, Stephen thought. We'll never have the chance to explore the rest of these.

"I usually begin with the inside corridor," Stephen said, "and Nilus knows it. I think we should go to the right."

Mason reached the entrance first and pointed his flashlight at the ground. "Footprints," he said. "We got him."

"He can't be far ahead," Stephen said. "He's not very quick and we've been moving fast. Let's pick up the pace."

Stephen aimed his flashlight toward the direction they just came from. He saw the shadow he was looking for, and then clicked his flashlight off and turned to face Owen.

"My flashlight is getting weak, Owen. Can you take the lead?"

"Sure," Owen said, approaching the corridor's opening. He shone his flashlight down the corridor, and then he spun around and said, "Wait a minute! You just don't want to be the one Nilus scares. You know darn well he's going to jump out at us."

"You're wrong. I just need to save my batteries. Besides, none of us is afraid of Nilus. You aren't, are you?"

"No, b-but you picked a perfect time to make me go first."

"Hey," Mason said, "we're wasting time. If you're too chicken to go first, I'll lead."

"I'll go, I'll go," Owen, said. "Jeez."

Owen ducked and started down the corridor. Stephen tapped Mason on the shoulder and whispered. "You guys go ahead. I've got a surprise for Nilus when he comes back."

"What are you going to do?" Mason asked, smiling.

"I'm going to scare the heck out of him, that's what. You guys go ahead. And don't worry, this is just for Nilus."

Mason crouched and trotted in Owen's direction. Stephen turned his flashlight on and looked for the shadow again. There, just before the corridor leading out of the opening, was a deep indentation in the rock, a perch about three feet off the ground.

What a perfect hiding place, Stephen thought. *From here I can watch them come, and when Nilus is just below me, I'll pounce.* He set his flashlight on the ledge and as he scaled the rock Stephen felt giddy. In his mind he could hear a mixture of his own laughter with Nilus's screaming like a girl. He stood up carefully and backed into the crevice.

It's perfect. This will be the best scare ever.

But Stephen got his own scare when he stepped forward to peek over the ledge. A large chunk of rock dislodged below his right foot, and he lost his balance and slipped. He landed hard on his buttocks and his legs now dangled over the ledge.

Whoa, that was close, he thought, and he felt his heart thumping in his chest. He gripped the wall and pulled himself up to his feet. He rubbed his backside—knowing he would find a bruise there later.

He carefully traced the rim of the ledge with his foot and tamped it firmly to make sure the rest of it was solid. It seemed fine. He turned off his flashlight and waited. His heart was still beating hard and fast, and he felt some tightness in his chest. Reaching in his back pocket for his inhaler, he squeezed the small device and inhaled deeply. Now all he needed to do was to wait for a sound to tip him off that his friends were approaching. On the cool, dark ledge he stood perfectly still and listened. He heard nothing.

Stephen wondered if now was the best time to play a prank on Nilus. He seemed upset about something, and Stephen had a strong feeling it had nothing to do with JC. It might not be a good idea to upset him further, at least until he knew what was bugging him.

A sudden touch to his arm made him go rigid and scream. Wild thoughts ravaged his mind. The sound of shuffling told him that someone or something was there on the ledge with

him. Stephen fumbled for the switch on his flashlight and when he turned it on he screamed again. Those eyes! Stephen spun and ran, but there was no ground in front of him. With his second step he toppled from the ledge. There was a horrible thud.

CHAPTER 6

Mason hardly heard a word Sheriff Lampert said to him as they drove back to the mine. The conversation was just a drone, the words washed out by his thoughts of Stephen. One of the last images Mason had seen was that of Stephen sprawled out on the ground, his head against a blood-covered rock. Ignoring the sheriff's rambling, Mason replayed the events in his mind once more.

It turned out that Nilus didn't get to scare anyone. Owen and Mason had simply caught up with him before he was able to find a place to hide. When they spotted him, Owen yelled, "We see you, Nilus. Maybe if you were a little faster your attempt to scare us wouldn't have been so lame."

"Shut up, Owen. If I'd had more time, I'd have found a good place. I just didn't have enough time."

Owen rolled his eyes. "Yeah—whatever."

“Come on guys, we’d better get going,” Mason said.

Owen looked over Mason’s shoulder. “Where’s Stephen?”

Mason wanted to smile, but he didn’t. Someone was going to get a good scare today, and it wasn’t going to be him. “I don’t know. He was here a minute ago.”

Nilus’s voice picked up a gruff quality. “Great. I’ll bet he’s on the other side of the entrance, waiting to scare us.”

“I don’t know,” Mason said. “Let’s go find out.”

The boys turned around and retraced their steps. As usual, Nilus complained about having to stoop so low. It appeared as though the farther they traveled into the mine, the shorter the ceiling became. Nilus only lagged a short distance behind them when the boys exited the corridor. They stood up straight and stretched, and then they shone their flashlights in every direction. In the distance, near the entrance to the cavity, Mason saw a flashlight lying on the ground.

Mason could hardly hold back his smile. *It’s a trick. He’s going to scare them good.*

“Hey, guys, over there! I think we found Stephen.”

Nilus lumbered toward the flashlight just as Mason expected he would. As the boys got closer, Mason thought he saw something on the ground. *I wonder what he’s up to.*

A few feet farther and Nilus saw exactly what was on the ground. He ran the last few steps.

“Oh Jesus,” he said, “Stephen’s hurt!”

Mason and Owen ran to the spot where Stephen was lying outstretched, his skull against a chunk of bloody rock.

“Oh my God,” Mason said. “Is he breathing?”

The boys were stunned, frozen, trying to understand what had happened. No one wanted to move him. Finally, Mason knelt beside him. “Owen, do you have your iPod?”

“Yeah, but why? What good will that do?”

“Just give it here.”

Owen reached in his back pocket and pulled it out. Mason grabbed it from him and polished the back side against his pants leg. Then he held it under Stephen’s nose. When he shone the flashlight just right, he could see moisture steam its chromed surface every time Stephen exhaled.

“He’s breathing!” Mason said. “We’ve gotta get him out of here.”

“There’s no way we’re gonna get him outta here!” Nilus screamed. “We got nothing to carry him out on, and even if we did, we can’t stand up straight in this place. We need to bring a doctor down here.”

Owen added, “Nilus is right. It’s too far to carry him and I’m not sure we should move him at all. We need to go for help.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Mason said. “You guys go get help.”

“No way,” Owen said. “We all need to go. He’s hurt too bad. If one of us doesn’t get him a doctor fast, he could die. Besides, you can’t do him any good here. Let’s do this: I’ll go to the hospital, you get the sheriff, and Nilus, you just get to the first phone you can find and call an ambulance. Then we’ll meet back here.”

Mason’s eyes welled with tears. “I can’t just leave him here alone—I can’t.” He turned Stephen onto his back, and then he took off his jacket, rolled it up, and shoved it under Stephen’s head.

Owen stood up. “Mason, you’ve done everything you can do here. We have a better chance of saving him if we all go. C’mon.”

Mason arranged Stephen’s flashlight on the ground so that it illuminated his best friend’s face and torso. It was as though he felt the light would protect him.

“You hang in there, buddy,” Mason said. “We’ll be right back.” When he stood, his fists were clenched. “Okay, let’s go. We can’t waste any time.”

“Me first,” said Owen.

Owen's limited height worked to his advantage in the mines. He took off running. Even hunched over, Owen could run fast.

"Me next," Mason said, and he darted into the corridor. Nilus said nothing, but lumbered after them as fast as he could go.

* * *

In the mine, all was still. From atop the perch where Stephen had fallen, a slight, white arm with deep purple veins extended over the ledge. Instantly, Stephen's flashlight popped up off the ground, and then it shot through the air and set down about thirty feet up the corridor. In near darkness, a figure leaped from the ledge and landed beside the injured boy with hardly a sound. The silhouette knelt beside him. Long, clawed fingers probed for the injury and quickly found it, a deep gash on the side of Stephen's head.

A command echoed in the creature's mind. <Save him.>

The creature answered, <Yes, my rector.>

The figure held out its hand and spread its fingers wide. With a short, slashing motion it used its long, sharp claws to slice the pale white flesh of its palm. It pressed the bloody palm against Stephen's wound, mingling their blood. The figure raised its head in silence as though it were meditating. The boy stirred.

Thousands of thoughts flooded Stephen's mind, but none were familiar—or were they? What kind of dream was this? Words came to mind—most he had never heard before, and yet he understood their meaning. Dark caverns and passages, a city chiseled of rock, hundreds of people working. People, or creatures? What were they doing? Working in unison, orderly, like a machine, but at different tasks—surviving. Someone eating

something with gray fur—rats? Sleeping, working in harmony, parents, children, evil—danger. Danger!



Stephen convulsed, and then his eyes flew open and he shuddered. There was little available light, and Stephen could hardly make out any details of the figure hovering over him, but he knew who it was.

“Thorak,” Stephen said.

<Yes, I am Thorak, the Tracker, and you—your name is Stephen?>

“Yes, Stephen Carter.”

<How do you feel, Stephen Carter?>

Stephen sat up. It took a moment for him to remember that he had fallen off the ledge. Thoughts crowded his mind. It was difficult to sort them out, to concentrate on one thing. He intended to answer the question, but a different thought took precedence.

“It was you,” Stephen said, “in my dreams.”

<I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was trying to communicate—you didn’t understand.>

“The spoons—you made them stick to my face. You were a rabbit.”

<I’m sorry it took me so long to understand what you were trying to do. But when I tried to help, you were frightened. Why did you place those shiny objects on your face? Why was it so important to you?>

“It wasn’t important. I thought it was, but it wasn’t. You have been trying to contact me. I feel that something bad is about to happen. Why? What is the danger?”

<Your people,> Thorak said, <Pravus intends to kill them.>

“Pravus—he’s evil. I know it, I can sense it. But why does he want to hurt us?”

<Pravus hates surface dwellers, and your people are invading our home, exploring our caverns. We do not wish to be discovered. Validus is willing to leave this place—travel to a new location—but not Pravus. He and his tribe will not go. He would rather kill the people of your town than leave. You must convince your people to stay out of the mines.>

“I can’t do that,” Stephen said. “They’ve found gold again. They’re going to mine it.”

Thorak paused to read more of Stephen’s thoughts. <The yellow metal—it has value to you. I understand. But things have changed. You must convince your people. Your abbus is one of them.>

Stephen was aware that Thorak had said *abbus*, and he knew he meant father. Thorak was saying many words that Stephen had never heard before, but he understood every one of them. Stephen’s sight was adjusting to the dark. He thought he saw another wave of movement across the surface of Thorak’s eyes, but it was different this time. In the dark he couldn’t see their

pebble-like structure. Instead, he saw pinpoints of fluorescent blue light that swept across their surface. The waves of movement were just like in his dream, but now he understood their meaning.

“What’s happening to me? I know things—so many things, I can’t think straight.”

Thorak went from his knees to a sitting position. <Do not be afraid. It is happening to me, too. Your thoughts are flooding my mind. You were hurt.> He pointed. <Your head hit that rock. You were bleeding badly. The only way to save you was to perform the *exsisto unus*. If I had not, you would have died.>

Stephen didn’t ask what that was. The thoughts he was picking up from Thorak were already filling in the blanks that were once questions. He just realized that Thorak had yet to move his lips. He decided not to speak and instead, asked his next question in his thoughts.

<I see images; I have memories that are not mine. Can you stop this?>

<No,> Thorak answered. <During the *exsisto unus* our blood mingled. It was my blood that saved you. You can now share my thoughts and the thoughts of my people.>

<I’m dizzy. I don’t have room for any more thoughts. I’m not sure I have room for my own thoughts. It’s too much—too confusing.>

Thorak placed a small, pale hand on Stephen’s shoulder. <You will grow used to it, and in time you will control it. I know we are intruding on your life, but I have also saved it. If you do not help us, your people will not be so fortunate.>

<How can I convince them to stop mining? This is a mining town—it’s what we do. Will you come with me? We can tell them together.>

<No,> Thorak said. <Except for you, we want no interaction with the surface people. We only visit your world on occasion for supplies and clear water. You must be our voice.>

Water that runs uphill, Stephen thought. Feeling uneasy, he stood up and looked down at Thorak. <What you are asking me to do is impossible. My people need to hear this from you. My father already thinks I'm crazy. He would never believe my story. How am I supposed to convince him without proof?>

<You will find a way.>

Stephen shuddered. <My friends—where are they?>

<After your injury, they ran out of the mine.>

<They must have gone for help,> Stephen said. <How long ago?>

Thorak said something Stephen didn't understand. It took about five seconds, but a translation of the creature's time to Stephen's time crept into his thoughts. Stephen knew it had been about twenty-five minutes ago that his friends had left for help.

<That means they'll be back anytime. They can't find you here.>

Thorak stood up. The top of his head reached the height of Stephen's chest. <We need more time to talk. We must have a plan, and I need to tell you more about Pravus, the evil one.>

<That will have to wait,> Stephen said. <I'm sorry, but I need to go.>

<Then I will go with you.>

Stephen gasped. He knew what Thorak was planning. It frightened him because he didn't know if they could pull it off. He held out his hands just as Thorak had instructed him to do by thought. Stephen faced Thorak in the dark, and again, Stephen noticed pinholes of blue light emitting from the tiny bead-like nodules that moved across the surface of Thorak's eyes. Thorak took both of Stephen's hands loosely into his own and tilted his head back as he had before. Stephen stayed silent. In a matter of seconds Thorak's skin lost its pallor. Hair sprouted from his

head, and his face changed shape. His large yellow teeth became small and white, and he grew to Stephen's height. When it was over, Stephen could swear he was looking into a mirror.

<I'm blind,> Thorak said. <You surface dwellers are blind.>

<No, it's just dark in here. Give your eyes a minute to adjust.> Stephen scrutinized the human form in front of him. <You're me!> Stephen said. <But you can't be me.>

<It's only a starting place. I will make some changes as we head to the surface. We need to go now.>

Thorak took the lead and ran in the direction of the dim beam cast by Stephen's flashlight. His new height didn't seem to hinder his nimbleness. When Stephen came to his flashlight, he scooped it up and continued running. He struggled to keep up with Thorak, and bumped his head twice. But all the running helped Stephen clear his head. When they arrived in the cavern that contained the room with the smooth walls, they heard voices and saw approaching lights. They sped up to reach the other side of the room, and seconds later they were face to face with Sheriff Lampert and Mason.

"Stephen!" Mason said in shock.

Sheriff Lampert twisted the knob of his electric lantern to brighten the light, and then he held it high. Thorak squinted.

"Hello, Mr. Carter," said Sheriff Lampert. "I understand you are unconscious and possibly critically injured. Can I get an ambulance for you? Oh wait—it's already here."

Immediately after Lampert's sarcasm, Owen appeared from the corridor followed by two men stooping low, carrying a stretcher. One of them had a medical emergency bag slung over his shoulder.

"Stephen, you're okay!" Owen said. He had a puzzled look on his face.

Lampert turned to Mason. The expression on his face in addition to the sarcasm in his voice prompted Mason's eyes to widen defensively.

"Honest, Sheriff Lampert, he was injured badly. He was bleeding. We thought he was going to die." The lantern swung in Owen's direction.

"That's right, Sheriff. We didn't think he was going to make it."

"First of all," asked Sheriff Lampert, "does anybody here need medical attention?"

Stephen answered, "No, sir."

Lampert faced the medics and said, "Sorry for the false alarm, boys. I guess you can consider this an emergency drill."

John Price, the man carrying the medical bag, frowned. "We stage medical drills once a year, Sheriff. This was just a gigantic waste of time." His anger turned to scorn. "You boys got nothing better to do than to cry wolf?"

Stephen answered, "We're sorry, sir."

Price shook his head. He and his partner shuffled the stretcher until it was facing the opposite direction. Then Price looked at Owen and said, "We're leaving. Are you coming?"

Sheriff Lampert said, "I'll give him a ride back, John. I've got some questions for these boys."

"Good luck with that," Price said. "Let's go."

After the medics left, Lampert swung the lantern in Stephen's direction.

"What do you have to say about this, Carter?"

Stephen's heart was racing again. *I hate to lie*, he thought, *but no one would ever believe what really happened. But if I lie, I'm going to be grounded for the whole summer. Crap!*

"It was a prank, Sheriff, and I'm very sorry. I let it go too far. I should never have let them go for help."

"So, you agree that wasting our time is a bad idea?"

Stephen lowered his eyes. "Yes, sir."

"Who's your friend?"

<I am Thorak.>

Stephen's eyes widened. He had forgotten all about Thorak. When he looked to his right, he saw a boy who stood a foot shorter than himself, with disheveled blonde hair and an innocent face. No one had heard Thorak's answer. The sheriff was still waiting for a reply.

"His name is Thor, sir."

Lampert crumpled his nose, and Stephen realized it was probably from hearing such an odd name. "That's an unusual name, son. What's your last name?"

<I have no last name. I am Thorak, the tracker.>

<Thorak, tell him your last name is Johnson, and please use your mouth to speak—like this.>

"He's here from Chicago visiting relatives."

"I didn't ask him what he was doing here; I asked him his last name. And if you don't mind, Carter, I think the boy can speak for himself."

I sure hope so.

Stephen stared at Thorak wide-eyed, waiting for him to answer.

"My last name is Johnson."

"Well, that's better," Lampert said. "So what are you doing here?"

<Tell him you saw my bike parked outside and came in to find me.>

"I saw Stephen's bike parked outside and came in to find him." Thorak spoke in a monotone, but the sheriff didn't seem to notice.

"Who are you staying with?"

Stephen's stomach hurt. He had no idea how to answer this question. It was time for a diversionary tactic.

“He’s staying at my house tonight, Sheriff—that is, unless you tell my dad about this. In that case, I’ll probably be grounded for a month, and summer is almost here. Can you please not tell my dad about this?”

“Well, I don’t know, Mr. Carter. It seems to me that Warren would want to know all about this.”

“Please, Sheriff, it’ll be a miserable night for us if you tell him. And summer will be unbearable.”

“You should have thought about that before. I’ll have to think about this.”

Sheriff Lampert always called the boys by their last names. It was obvious that he wanted to be intimidating, if just a little, to the kids in town, but it was a fact that Lampert liked Stephen and Stephen knew it. Stephen could tell that Lampert was relieved that he was safe. Stephen caught his eye and gave him a pleading expression. It worked.

“Tell you what, Carter—I’ll let it go this once, but if you ever pull anything like this again, I’ll make sure your father is the first one I call. Do you understand?”

“Yes, thank you, Sheriff. Can we go home now?”

“Good idea. And boys—don’t let me catch you anywhere near this mine again. They’ll be dynamiting soon. Now let’s go—you kids lead the way.”

Mason went first, followed by Thor and Stephen. Stephen wanted to get Thor away from everyone as quickly as possible. There was no telling what he might say, and Stephen knew that sooner or later he would run out of explanations.

Thorak spoke by thought. <Don’t worry, Stephen, I won’t say any more.>

Stephen heard Thorak’s thought and felt a little embarrassed. Having someone else hear his thoughts was going to take some getting used to.

Stephen replied, <I'm sorry, Thorak, but you don't know how we live, or what our people think is normal. I'm afraid you'll say something I can't explain.>

<No need to apologize. I understand your logic. You are a very intelligent creature.>

Creature? Stephen thought. At first the comment offended him, but only for a moment. *Hmm, I suppose to him I am a creature.*

During the hike back to the mine's entrance, the voices in Stephen's head became steadily louder and more plentiful. It was unnerving. When they got outside, Stephen had to concentrate to apologize to Mason. "I'm really sorry, Mace. That was a terrible trick I played on you."

"You're damned right it was! You were supposed to just jump out and scare us, not make us think you were dead! I hope you and your new friend had a good laugh about it."

"Mason, I said I'm sorry!"

"Yeah? Well, maybe you are—but right now I need to go with Sheriff Lampert. My bike is parked at the police station. You know why? 'Cause I rode it down there to save your life. Maybe I won't next time."

Mason ran down the hill to catch up with Sheriff Lampert.

"I gotta go, that's my ride too," Owen said. "I'm glad you're okay, Stephen, but that was a nasty trick. Don't worry about Mason. We'll probably be laughing about this next week."

Nilus arrived on his bike just as Mason was getting in the sheriff's car. Stephen watched as they talked. Mason pointed at Stephen, and then Nilus pedaled up the hill.

Nilus stopped about ten feet from Stephen. "You know what, Carter? You're a butthead." That was all he said, and he rode away. The comment from Nilus didn't surprise Stephen, but Mason's tone pierced his heart. He would never play such an

insensitive trick on his best friend. But Mason saw, or thought he saw, what had happened with his own eyes. The best that Stephen could hope for was that Mason would forgive him in a day or two.

Stephen looked at his watch. “Oh crap! I’m supposed to be picking up my sister right now. I gotta go.”

<You go on ahead. I will meet you at your dwelling.>

Stephen frowned, “Really, you can’t come over, Thorak. I just told Sheriff Lampert that you were spending the night so he wouldn’t take you home to your parents. It’s a school night, I can’t have company.”

<I’ll see you there.>

“Thorak, please don’t come over. And another thing, you need to practice talking with your mouth.”

<If we talk my way, your father will never know I’m there. You can hide me in your sleeping quarters.>

“I don’t think so. Maybe we can talk tomorrow after school.”

<Go now,> Thorak said. <We will talk later.>

Stephen straddled his bike and then studied Thorak’s figure. The transformation from creature to human was simply amazing. “Thank you for saving my life.”

Thorak answered in a monotone voice. <We have never performed the *exsisto unus* on a surface dweller, but Validus thought that saving you was worthwhile.>

Stephen looked at his watch again and cringed. “Then please tell him thanks, too.” Stephen stood on his pedals and pumped as hard as he could. He could still make it home before his father if he didn’t stop for a rest. And he didn’t.

CHAPTER 7

Stephen couldn't remember seeing his dad in a better mood at the dinner table. In fact, he seemed almost giddy. He had done something he rarely did. He had picked up Chinese food and a chocolate cream pie at the local Safeway store. It was a stroke of luck for Stephen, because without the delay, his dad would have arrived home before them. The Carter kids had to be home at six on school nights. On those rare occasions when Mr. Carter was going to be late, there was usually something in the refrigerator the kids could warm up for dinner.

The voices in Stephen's head continued to grow more intense. It made it difficult to concentrate on anything else. Stephen was becoming miserable.

"Are we celebrating something, Dad?" Stephen struggled to ask. Chocolate cream pie was just that—a celebration dessert.

“In a way, yes. We got the green light to start dynamiting Hawkins Mine. It’ll take a few weeks to set all the charges, but we’ll be excavating in no time. If the mine is as rich as I think it is, we’re going to get a healthy bonus. We can remodel the house—maybe take a trip.”

“Can we go to Disneyland?” asked JC.

“Now that’s a possibility. What do you think, Stephen? Would you like to go to Disneyland?”

“Sure. That would be great.”

Stephen said the right thing, but there was no enthusiasm in the words.

“Is everything okay, son?”

Everything wasn’t okay. Stephen had almost died earlier today, and a strange creature had saved his life by mixing their blood. Now he couldn’t shut off the constant flood of thoughts and images from this odd civilization. Thorak had told him that someone named Pravus intended to kill the residents of Leadville. Definitely not a good day.

“Yeah, everything’s fine, Dad. I’m just tired. I think I’m going to go to bed after dinner.”

“Did you have another nightmare last night?”

“No. It’s just been a long day, that’s all.” *But I sure had a nightmare today*, he thought.

“You look ill. You didn’t overexert yourself, did you?”

His dad’s question hardly stood out from the tangle of other voices Stephen heard in his head. If he looked ill, it was from the stress of trying to sort the reality of the moment from other interruptions invading his thoughts. The voices he heard were both male and female. They spoke in monotone, just like Thorak. Most gave directions or commands, seemingly working on projects of some kind. Stephen felt dizzy, as though he were eavesdropping on a hundred conversations at once.

Stephen struggled to answer his dad. “No, Nilus and I worked on a science project after school. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Me too,” said JC. “Jenny showed me her new dollhouse. I almost puked.”

Mr. Carter frowned. “That’s no way to talk at the dinner table, Jasmine.”

“Well, it’s true. Jenny’s dollhouse wasn’t so bad, but the dolls were awful. She’s got about twenty of them. Each one is dressed up differently. She’s got a nurse’s outfit, a princess outfit, a wedding outfit...”

<Stephen, come to your sleeping quarters.>

Stephen froze solid. His eyes moved slowly to his dad, who apparently didn’t hear the voice. He was still listening to JC, and JC was still babbling about Jenny’s dolls.

Is he here? Did Thorak sneak into my room? Stephen dipped a morsel of chicken in the sweet and sour sauce and shoved it in his mouth.

<Stephen, come to your sleeping quarters.>

<I will, I will, but after I finish eating. I can’t just leave—they’ll know something is wrong. You weren’t supposed to come. I told you not to come.>

<We need to talk, Stephen. It cannot wait. I am hungry. Can you bring me some food?>

<Yes, I’ll bring you something as soon as I can, but you’ll have to wait until I finish dinner.>

Stephen glanced at his dad, who was now staring at him. So was JC.

“What in the world are you doing?” his dad asked.

Uh oh, Stephen thought. Did they hear me? Did I speak out loud? I don’t even know. This is so confusing.

“I don’t know,” Stephen said. “What did it look like I was doing?”

His dad spoke cautiously. “You were making gestures at your plate. You looked at it like it was irritating you. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to talk to it.”

Stephen turned red. *Please, God, make this stop. I can’t keep it all straight. Too many voices. . . too much information.* Instantly the voices stopped. All of the background noise disappeared, and for the first time in forty-five minutes, it was quiet in Stephen’s head. The sudden calmness was almost unnerving, but Stephen concentrated on answering his dad.

“I was going over the presentation for my science project in my head. It has to be perfect. I still have a lot to memorize.”

Stephen’s dad looked at him with great concern. “When is the project due, son?”

“Next Monday, but there’s a lot to memorize,” Stephen repeated.

“You have plenty of time for memorization. You can work on it tomorrow. Meanwhile, I think you’re right. Maybe you should get to bed early tonight.”

“Can I take my dessert to my room?”

“If you promise to bring your plate down in the morning.”

Stephen agreed, and ran into the kitchen to get the dessert plates. His dad gave him a generous slice of pie. He grabbed the plate and a fork and made his way upstairs.

“Is Stephen acting kind of weird?” JC asked.

“A little,” Mr. Carter replied, “but he’s overly tired. He just needs a good night’s sleep.”

JC continued her story about Jenny’s dolls, and her dad stared at nothing, doing his best to pay attention to what she was saying.

* * *

Stephen opened his bedroom door to find Thorak going through his desk drawers.

“What are you doing?” Stephen asked.

<I was searching for more food, and I caution you to not speak out loud.>

Thorak’s words and tone did not fit the timid-looking, blonde-haired boy. Even though he spoke through his thoughts, Thorak had a tone Stephen recognized just as if it were an audible voice.

Stephen frowned and transitioned the conversation to his thoughts. <What do you mean you are searching for ‘more’ food?>

<I found this—do you have more?> Thorak held out a candy bar wrapper.

“My Snickers!”



<Unless you want to be heard, please use your thoughts. Do you have more Snickers? I have never eaten anything like it. I crave another.>

Stephen frowned, and answered in his thoughts. <No, that was the only one I had.>

<Where can I get another? I am still hungry for Snickers.>

Stephen handed Thorak his chocolate cream pie. <Here, eat this.>

Thorak took the plate and grasped the pie in his hand. Chocolate cream filling oozed between his fingers. He took the first bite and then another. Within seconds the pie was gone, but Thorak was a mess. He licked at the chocolate ring around his mouth, and then went to his fingers. Stephen's face showed his disapproval, and Thorak picked up his thoughts.

<A fork? What is that? I sense that the way I eat makes you uncomfortable. I apologize. You must teach me your customs.>

<There's no time for that now, but wait here for a minute—and don't touch anything.>

Stephen ran to the linen closet and grabbed a washcloth. Then he went in the bathroom and ran it under warm water from the faucet. When he got back to his room, Thorak was still licking his fingers.

<Here, give me your hands,> Stephen said. He washed Thorak's hands and face, and as he did, he sensed an aura of innocence, as if this creature were nothing more than a little boy.

<The water on the cloth is warm,> Thorak said. <How did you do that?>

<We get hot water from the sink. I don't suppose you have hot water where you come from.>

As Stephen thought about the sink, the image was transferred to Thorak's mind.

<I see it,> he said. <I see water pouring from a stout, shiny pipe into a white basin. How fascinating. We do not heat water

or anything in our dwelling. Where I live the temperature is always the same. Your surface temperatures change drastically from hot to cold. We do not like coming to the surface except in the cool temperatures of this period, but in this body I do not feel so uncomfortable.>

<You live deep below the mines, don't you?> Stephen asked.

<What you call the mines, we call the upper passages. Yes, we live far below the upper passages—for now. But Validus says we must move our home unless we can stop the surface dwellers from exploring our caverns. We did not know why your people were going below the surface, but now we do. Why must you have this yellow metal? What is its value? What use is it to you?>

Stephen only had a vague idea of the purpose of gold and its value to the economy. He doubted he could explain what little he knew. It really didn't make sense to him that a metal was used to give the U.S. dollar its value. If he didn't understand it, Thorak and his people would never grasp the concept.

<All I can tell you is that it's like money. We can buy things with it.>

<What is buy?> Thorak asked.

Stephen pursed his lips. <Well, if I go to the store, and I give them money, I can buy a Snickers candy bar. It's like a trade. Money for Snickers.>

<So if I give them yellow metal...>

<Gold,> Stephen interrupted.

<...then they will give me Snickers?>

<Yes, it's something like that.>

<No wonder the surface dwellers want gold,> Thorak said.

<Yes, and tomorrow I'll show you where you can buy a Snickers candy bar whenever you want one.>

<I did not bring any yellow metal with me.>

<We'll use money,> Stephen said. <I'll explain what that is tomorrow. Now I have a question for you, Thorak. You stopped the voices in my head. I thought you told me you couldn't do that.>

Thorak nodded. <I can only do it for short periods. It severely affects my ability to track Pravus, but you were having such difficulty talking to your abbus, I felt I should help. But you must learn to control the voices on your own. Now can we talk? I need to tell you about Pravus.>

Thorak sat on the floor, and Stephen sat in a chair and thought about how the word *abbus* had converted to the word *father* in his mind. The innocent-looking, blonde-haired boy took on an expression as though he was pondering something. Then he continued speaking.

<About fifty seasons ago, Pravus was a powerful member of our tribe. But he did not like authority, and he did not like the leadership of Validus, our rector. He undermined Validus at every opportunity. You see, by law there can only be one ruler of our people—one tribe. And only the most powerful male can be crowned rector. Pravus wanted to be the rector of our tribe, but he was not nearly as powerful as Validus. So he created dissent among our people. He promised them things he could never make happen. He told our people that if he were ruler they would never have to work again, but how could that be? There must be someone to do the work—we must all work for the tribe.

Pravus caused a revolt. It split us into three tribes. Validus rules the largest and most powerful tribe. But Pravus still wants to unite all of us under his rule, and he would kill Validus to do it. We were forced to flee Subterdomus, our glorious city. It was difficult to abandon our home, and for a full season after the uprising, we journeyed with Validus to this place. We never thought Pravus would leave Subterdomus to follow us. He had everything he could want, except for the loyalty of our people.

What he does not understand is that even if he became our rector, he would never have our loyalty. Even those who followed him have become disenchanting. But now they are trapped under his rule, roaming the land in search of us. He is a dictator, and he is breaking our law. Pravus leads his tribe without a title. We do not recognize him as a rector. But he will never be satisfied until he is named rector of all the tribes.>

<It sounds to me like he's crazy,> Stephen said.

<He is mad with a desire for power. Validus believes that he is the essence of evil. Even seasons before the rebellion, Pravus stopped using his skills for the betterment of the tribe. He has since been developing his talents for the sole purpose of controlling others. He killed three of his own people when they tried to escape his rule and return to our tribe. Then he took their abilities. When one of our people dies, the strongest male present inherits his skills. That duty always falls to the rector if he is there. Because of that, Pravus has grown much more powerful. His remaining followers are afraid to leave for fear of their lives.>

<If Validus is so powerful, why doesn't he just defeat him?>

<If he had known what was going to happen—had he known the pain and suffering Pravus was to cause, he might have done that. But we have always been a peaceful people, and Validus had no way of seeing the future. The changes in Pravus happened over several years. We were unassuming and unprepared. We now realize that a battle is in our future—maybe at any moment. Validus fears for our lives, and also the lives of your people.>

<You said there were three tribes.>

<Yes. A group of us was lost after the revolt. I believe they wanted nothing to do with Pravus or Validus for fear of war. Even with my superior tracking abilities I have been unable to

locate them. But I know the Communis tribe would rejoin us if there was no threat of attack from Pravus.

Stephen shuddered. He suddenly felt cold. <Maybe we can hide you from Pravus.>

<No, Stephen. Pravus found us from two regions away. There is no hiding from him.>

<Then our people will fight with you,> Stephen said, sitting up straight.

<We do not want to be discovered, Stephen. We will avoid that at all costs. It was a great risk contacting you.>

<Then why did you?>

<The need outweighed the risk. Validus detests the killing of any creatures and your people are in danger. He decided we should find someone, a spokesperson we could trust.>

Stephen's lips became a thin slit. <How did you know you could trust me?>

<For days I followed surface dwellers,> Thorak said. <I found that younger surface dwellers seemed more innocent. By chance I found you and your female sibling. I had a strong inclination about you. Your mind was willing and your thoughts were pure. Even before the *exsisto unus*, I could almost communicate with you. The only thing that prevented it was our language barrier.>

<Well, if your tribe is bigger, you should be able to defeat Pravus, right?>

<Simple logic would agree with you, but Pravus has—>

There was a loud creak at the stairs. Thorak froze.

“Quick,” Stephen whispered, “someone’s coming. Get in the closet.”

Thorak stepped in the closet and just missed having his fingers pinched by the closing door. Stephen spun around just in time to see his dad poke his head into the bedroom.

“I need to go out, Stephen. Will you lock the door behind me and keep Jasmine inside?” His dad looked tense as he spoke.

“Why, Dad? What’s wrong?”

“There’s been an accident at the mine. I’m going there to meet my boss and the sheriff.”

“The sheriff? Was someone hurt?”

“I can’t say. I’ll know more in a little while. You and Jasmine stay inside, okay?”

“Okay, Dad.”

Stephen followed his dad down the stairs and locked the door behind him. It gave him an eerie feeling because they rarely locked the door. Stephen guessed that something more had happened than what his dad had told him.

When he went back upstairs, Thorak was sitting on the floor with his eyes closed and his legs tucked beneath him, yoga-style.

<It has begun,> Thorak said.

<What’s begun?>

<Pravus has killed the first surface dweller.>

<How do you know?>

<He is rejoicing at this moment, proud of his foul deed. He is without question, the essence of evil. He will not stop killing surface dwellers until your father abandons the upper passages. And he will not attack us until your people have gone. You must tell them, Stephen. You must do it before it is too late.>

Stephen and Thorak talked for another hour. Stephen stopped only to watch JC say her bedtime prayers, and in his mind he prayed with her. He prayed for the safety of the people of Leadville, and for Thorak and Validus. He prayed that he would become normal again, and that this nightmare would end.

Before the evening was through, Stephen had learned much more about the civilization of creatures that lived below Hawkins Mine. In Stephen’s mind they were an odd people who

appeared to have few emotions, but a strong sense of duty. The creatures all had a job to do according to their talents, and doing that job seemed to be the only thing that fulfilled them. Their culture made certain that no single individual profited from his or her job, but that everything was done for the benefit of the community. Some of the creatures hunted for food or raised rats, a main food staple. Others taught the children about their culture and helped them to discover their strongest talents. And once they realized which of their talents were the strongest and most natural, trainers would help them to develop the skill or skills they would eventually use to support the community.

There were few creatures as powerful as Thorak. However, many did possess a single, yet powerful ability. In the Validus tribe, there were six with multiple talents, including General Magnus, who had exhibited exceptional abilities from a very young age. The most gifted creatures became shapers. They could control most or all of the earth's elements. They used their skills to carve and move rock, and to reshape it into smooth structures that would become the walls and rooms of their underground dwellings.

Validus had lost many of his shapers to the other tribes due to the revolt. His tribe was desperate to train new shapers, but that would take years. Not only were they needed to finish building the city below Hawkins Mine, but if there was trouble, the shapers were naturally the best soldiers, because the earth's elements became their weapons. Currently, the shapers were mining metals to form swords and spears. The underlings—those who had no special abilities—would use the weapons to defend the women and children should the tribe of Pravus attack. Validus could shape stone, too. He had almost all of the abilities of his tribe members. That is what made him so powerful.

There were two creatures that were trained to move clear water from the surface to underground reservoirs. Now Stephen understood why he had seen water running uphill. They made water come to them. The longer Stephen spoke to Thorak, the more he understood how his people worked like a finely tuned machine to support each other. It was fascinating.

In forty-four seasons, which Stephen equated to years, the creatures had created a small city deep below the mines. Because they had so few shapers, it was still far from finished, and it would never be as large or elegant as Subterdomus, but for now it was their home.

Stephen was getting tired. He tucked his legs under himself and said, <I know why Pravus wants to kill Validus, but why does he want to kill you? Wouldn't you have to obey him if he became the rector?>

<Yes, but with me alive, Pravus might never become rector. I am the second most powerful of our tribe. That makes me the rightful heir to Validus's abilities, should he die. Although Pravus is nearly my equal, Validus gives me personal training. We continue to hone my skills so that Pravus cannot surpass me. To become rector, he must kill one of us and inherit the skills of the one he killed. Validus would be the most logical target for Pravus. Not only would Pravus inherit greater abilities from Validus, but he would also gain my services as tracker for the tribe. There is only one problem with Pravus's plan.>

<What's that?>

<He must get Validus alone in order to steal his abilities. The strongest male in his presence at death will inherit his abilities. I have no intention of leaving Validus prey to Pravus, or to anyone.>

<And what if he kills you?>

<If Pravus killed me and acquired my abilities, he would be more powerful than Validus. By Subterdoman law he would be crowned rector.>

<Who cares about the law? If he's evil, why would you let him rule your people?>

Thorak's boyish looks disappeared. Sharp lines creased his face as he frowned. <We respect the abilities we are born with. I would have no choice in the matter.>

Stephen shivered. <I hope that doesn't happen, Thorak. I hope you can find a way to defeat him.>

<We had hoped to avoid being discovered until after Validus's death. He is over two hundred seasons old—near the end of his life. No Subterdoman has ever lived past two hundred and four. We were so close.>

Stephen crinkled his nose. <So you want Validus to die?>

<No. Not until it is his time. Never has there been a greater rector. I would serve him for all of eternity if I could. But everyone must pass into the next life—even our rectors. The fact remains he will die soon of old age, and I must take his place.>

<How old are you?>

<I am only fifty-two. I will be the youngest rector in history to rule our people.>

<And until now, all you've done is track?> Stephen asked.

<Tracking is my most important duty, but I perform other tasks as well. However, no other Subterdoman has the keen senses that allow me to keep watch over our enemies, including Pravus. But they must be close enough for me to track, at least within a region before I can sense their presence.>

Stephen received a mental picture from Thorak. A region was a vast area, maybe fifty miles, maybe a hundred. The distance was difficult to gauge.

<Thankfully, tracking is one of Pravus's few weaknesses. He does not have a tracker, but he has become powerful in other ways. He has been searching for us for forty-five seasons—half his lifetime. Others would have given up in despair, but not Pravus. Even Validus had predicted that Pravus would give up and return to Subterdomus. But his desire for power was too great. His tribe stumbled into our region about ten seasons ago. If his tracking skills had matched mine, he would have found us soon after. But Pravus must be very close to sense our whereabouts. Unfortunately, his persistence has rewarded him. He is now upon us, and waiting to strike. He has sworn to kill anyone who stands in his way of ruling our tribe. It is only a matter of time before he invades our dwelling. I believe the only thing that has prevented his attack is the presence of the surface dwellers. He has contempt for them.>

<Why? We haven't done anything to him.>

<Perhaps he is offended that you rule the surface world. He once said to Validus that the surface dwellers were an inferior race, and therefore should be placed into service to tend to our needs. And that is precisely why you are in danger, Stephen. He has no regard for your lives.>

Stephen shivered as he realized the magnitude of the threat to the people of Leadville.

<Throughout the seasons,> Thorak continued, <Pravus has lost whatever regard he once had for living creatures, including those of his own race. That is why we have no choice but to face him now. We must protect our women and children, and most importantly, Validus. But it will be difficult. Other than Pravus, none of us has ever killed one of our own race. Two seasons ago, Validus chose General Magnus as our *militis imperator* and since then he has explored the ways of battle. He is training the males to fight as I speak, but as warriors, we have not been put to

the test. Our hearts do not believe in the sword. I am afraid that we cannot kill another living being.>

<Well, you'd better learn fast,> Stephen said, <if you want to protect yourselves.>

<How easy it is for you to judge us, Stephen, but unlike your civilization, ours is based on unity and preservation.>

<You mean your civilization *was* based on unity and preservation. It only takes one crazy person to start a war.>

<We detest war. Every person is committed to the community—whatever is best for the tribe.>

The voices in Stephen's head were coming back again. He hoped that continuing the conversation would distract him and make them go away.

<Humans aren't any different,> Stephen said. <We don't like war, and we don't like killing either, but sometimes we can't help it. Sometimes it's a matter of self-defense.>

<Validus says that all killing is avoidable.>

<Who's judging now?>

Looking at Thorak's face Stephen couldn't tell whether he was hurt or sad.

<Can you tell me about your home?> Stephen asked. <What's it like, deep underground?>

Thorak met Stephen's gaze. Unlike the creature whose emotions once eluded him, Stephen could see anguish in his blue, human-like eyes.

<You will see soon enough, Stephen. Validus wants to speak to you. But for tonight, the only thing that is important is for you to decide how you will keep your people away from the mines. I will quell the voices in your head, so you can think about it, and then we must sleep.>

Stephen's thoughts were once again relieved of the crushing burden of voices, and Thorak entered the closet and closed

the door. Stephen stared at the closet door for a full minute, wondering what Thorak was doing in there. He felt alone.

What can I say to Dad and the miners? he thought. *There's nothing I can say to keep them away. Only the truth will stop them—but not if it comes from a crazy kid.*