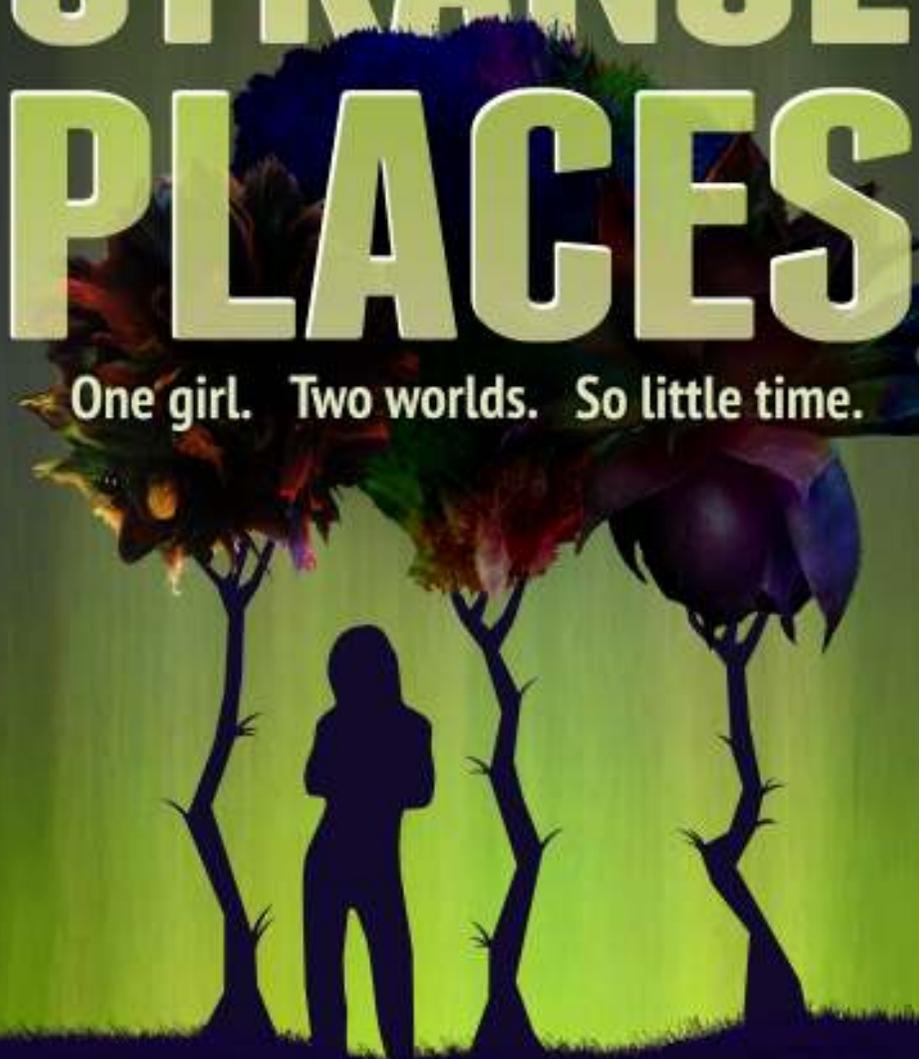


Free Preview Novella

STRANGE PLACES

The background of the cover features a silhouette of a girl standing between two trees. The trees have large, vibrant, and somewhat fantastical flowers growing from their branches. The background is a gradient of green, transitioning from a darker shade at the top to a lighter shade at the bottom. The overall aesthetic is mysterious and magical.

One girl. Two worlds. So little time.

Jefferson
JSMITH

FREE PREVIEW NOVELLA

STRANGE PLACES

BOOK ONE
OF FINDING TAYNA



JEFFERSON SMITH



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creativityhacker.ca
findingtayna.com

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First edition: June 2011

This is a free preview novella.

The full book is available in electronic form as:
ISBN: 978-0-9866936-3-2

[Kindle](#), [Kobo](#), [Nook](#), [Sony](#),
Apple and [Indie Ink Publishing](#)

Or in print form as:
ISBN: 978-0-9866936-1-8

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The greatest poem I ever wrote is just four words long,
yet it contains my entire world:

Brinnameade, Merridew, Rigel, Tayna.

My tribulation. My solace. My muses.

Introduction to the Preview Novella

One of the things that really bugs me about “sneak preview” editions of books is the part about the “sneak.” I can't tell you the number of times I've read through the free preview, only to be left hanging from a cliff just when things start to get interesting.

To read the exciting conclusion to Dashing Darla's dastardly dilemma, just send \$34.95 to blah, blah blah...

Sure, I understand that a preview is a marketing tool, and that nobody wins if I get the whole thing for free. For it to work, I have to become intrigued by the story and then buy the complete book. But that doesn't change the fact that when they leave me short, I feel cheated.

I don't mind being left with a hunger for more. After all, that's what good stories are supposed to do. The problem for me lies in that word, “more.” In order to have “more,” shouldn't I have had “some” first? When I read a preview, it's because I want to evaluate the quality of the story, but without an ending, it isn't a story at all—just a premise. Give me an ending. I don't mean end the entire plot—just end *something*. Without that, I can't tell if the writer is any good at that most important part—endings.

By now, you've probably noticed the irony. Jefferson is criticizing book previews in the introduction to his own book preview. Isn't that hypocritical? No, I don't think so. I'm just explaining why I've decided to do my preview differently. I'm not going to drag you into Tayna's life (she's the heroine of this series) and bail on you when she gets knee-deep into her first problem. Instead, I'm going to give you the entire first novella as a sample. Sure, I'm still going to leave you wanting more—at least, I hope I will—but only after I've given you a complete mini-story first. Then you'll have enough to judge. If you like this preview and want to follow Tayna further, then please, buy a copy of the book and join the adventure. If not, then at least you'll have had a good look her world and at my writing—including endings—and we can part as friends.

But Tayna is a cool heroine. I'm betting you'll want to know more.

Jefferson Smith

June 2011

chapter 1

“They’re coming!” Eliza ran into the dingy little room with wild excitement in her eyes and very little breath in her lungs. All around her, children’s eyes snapped up from their sewing and cleaning activities.

“Who’s coming?”

“Wannabes! Real swanky. She’s wearing a fur coat—I think it’s real—and they came in a limo. They’re coming up the stairs right now.”

“So what, Lies? Hasn’t anybody ever told you? Nobody ever comes to the fifth floor, except Sister Regalia, and she only ever comes up here to give us more work.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you guys,” Eliza said. “They didn’t stop on four. They’re coming *here!*”

The girls stared at her in disbelief, and then, suddenly, the room was electric, punctuated with shrieks of panic. Nobody was dressed for an interview! What would they say? How should they behave? These were the so-called Unlovables—the girls who had done so poorly in the few interviews they’d ever been granted that the Goodies had moved them to the fifth floor, so that they wouldn’t mess things up for the other, more likable girls. You know, when the wanna-dads and mommy-bes came by to inspect the latest stock and select their coordinating family accessories?

But they never came here. The fifth floor was where all the scratch-and-

dent merchandise was stored, the difficult girls, who were expected to work for their keep until they reached the age of sixteen, which is when the government would stop paying for their care and the Good Sisters could legally turn them out onto the streets. To make room for other, more profitable orphans. Of the twelve girls in the ward, several had been interviewed repeatedly before finally being declared Unlovable. But it was not to any of these grizzled veterans that the now panic-stricken group looked for advice. Instead, all heads turned to a single, raven-haired girl in the corner. She was the queen of rejection, the most unlovable of all the Unlovables, the girl so obviously lacking in adoptable qualities that she had never been given even a single interview and had been moved to the fifth floor on her very first day.

When she was just three years old.

In the ten years since then, Tayna still hadn't received so much as a request for an interview, not one, but she had seen it all. She knew every trick in the book. If there was a trick that Tayna didn't know about getting girls adopted, it was a trick that didn't work. No matter that they never seemed to work for *her*—they had always worked well for other girls. So now, every eye in the room was on her.

The pressure of eleven desperate, pleading faces dragged her out of the book she had been re-binding, and she looked intently from one terrified face to the next. Finally, she closed her book and stood up. "All right. Let's do it." She looked a question at Eliza, who was standing vigil by the door.

"They've stopped to tour the junior bunks. You've only got a couple of minutes."

"Right! Let's go!" Tayna clapped her hands enthusiastically, jolting the entire room out of their fear-trances in the process. "Let's partner up. Everybody raise your right hand."

The girls threw their hands immediately into the air. Beside her, four-year-old Rachel was holding up her left. Tayna pushed the errant hand back down, and pulled up on the other, which was determinedly clutching a small, plastic toy camera. "This one's your right, Rake," she said quietly, as she took the camera and hung it by its cord around the girl's neck.

“Okay, now everybody grab somebody else’s hand. Whoever you grab, that’s your partner. No swapsies.”

After a few frantic moments, the girls had all arranged themselves into pairs, with hands clenched in the air between them. “Your job now,” Tayna said “Is to look your partner over and find everything major that needs to be done. Neat hair, clean face, tidy clothes. Everything tucked in. Socks up. Sleeves down. Tallest girl in each pair inspects the shorter girl first. Go!”

The girls were accustomed to Tayna’s quick, decisive instructions—especially when something important had to be done quickly. She was a quick thinker and fearless about taking action once the decision was made, a quality that her ward-mates had learned to trust. As soon as she said “Go,” the shorter girl in each pair began to turn slowly, allowing her partner to scrutinize every inch of her appearance as she rhymed off a list of the most serious issues.

Tayna pointed out a few things for little Rachel to fix, and then she glanced toward Eliza, who turned away from her partner to check the hall again. Eliza shrugged uncertainly, so Tayna turned back to the task at hand.

“Okay, now everybody switch,” she said. “Short girls inspect the tall ones. After you’re done, both of you can take a minute to fix up whatever your partner suggested.”

The other half of the group began to rotate. Rachel tugged at Tayna’s sleeve, trying to get her to turn, but the older girl just smiled down at her. “Don’t worry about me, Rake. Any mommy-be that I could stand to live with will like me just the way I am. If she gets hung up on little stuff like this, I could never fit into her life anyway.”

As the girls attended to their personal grooming, Tayna looked toward the door again. “How much time, Lies?” Eliza opened the door a hair and checked the hallway again.

“Still clear. They’re getting the full tour, but they won’t be long. Better hurry.”

Tayna nodded. “Right. We don’t have time for anything fancy. We’ll just go with your basic Smile Parade.” She stepped forward into the center of the room, facing the door and held her arms out to the sides.

“Give me the two smallest girls on my left and right. Uh, Rake and Amanda.” She paused for a moment while a couple of girls shuffled away and made room for those two girls to move in. “Now the next tallest beside them, and then the next tallest, and so on.” There were only a few minor collisions as the girls got themselves sorted out. While they were doing that, Tayna excused herself from the line and went to the door to see for herself. The shadows spilling out into the hall were now coming from the open door of the senior bunk-room. The tour was almost done.

“Okay, when I say go, everybody goes back to the job they were doing before Lies came in. This always works better when they think they’ve surprised us. As soon as Sister Regalia opens the door, you all run back to the position you’re in now, got it? When you get lined up again, each of you turn to look at your neighbor and pretend to adjust something on her shirt or hair. Then turn and give the hubby your biggest smile, and I mean big. Ham it up. Try to split your face in half. The wanna-dads always think it’s great how committed you are and the mommy-bes love anything that gets him to show an interest.”

“Tayna?” Little Amanda had her hand in the air.

“What is it ’Anda?”

“I don’t know if I can remember all that.”

Tayna smiled and hunkered down a little. “It’s okay kiddo. Just look at who’s beside you now. Rachel and Becky. All you have to do is make sure you get back in line between them when the door opens, okay?” The little girl nodded. “And once you’re in line, give ’em your biggest smile. But don’t worry if you make a mistake. They’ll just think it looks cute.”

Suddenly, Eliza went stiff at the door. “Incoming!”

Tayna spun around. “Okay! Everybody back to your jobs until the door opens.” Then she crossed back to her work table, sat down and picked up the old book with the broken spine. The other girls raced back to their own tables in record time, but not a one of them was actually working. Only a few actually looked, but every girl in the room was focused intently on the door knob, like sprinters waiting for the starter’s pistol. And behind those eyes, each and every girl was deep

into the what-if game. What if this time it's *me* who gets an interview? What if they decide they *like* me? Would they ask me to come live with them, like a real family, with my own room and a cat and a grandma who likes to bake? The only sound was the clicking and clanking of the old radiator in the corner and Becky's shoes rubbing nervously together.

Then the light vanished from beneath the door and it began to swing in. "...and we can store the rest of them in here." Sister Regalia strode into the room, talking briskly to somebody behind her. Tayna realized instantly that something was wrong, but before she could stop them, the girls were already scrambling into position. The parade line formed perfectly in front of the door, with each girl turning to check her neighbor for last-minute lint and stray hairs. Then they hit the high-beams, turning on their maximum, high-voltage smiles, any one of which was bright enough to melt the hearts of a Porscheful of divorce lawyers. But it still wasn't enough to thaw even an eyelash off the scowl of Sister Regalia. When the senior Sister turned back to face the room and saw the crisp line-up of beaming faces, she stopped short.

And then she laughed.

She laughed so hard, she nearly doubled over. The eyes of every girl in the room widened in surprise when the old nun actually slapped her thigh in delight and then had to place both hands on her knees to keep from collapsing to the floor. "Who, who, a who taught you to do that?" she asked, struggling for breath. Then she caught Tayna glaring at her from her place at the end of the line. Regalia smiled cruelly and drew herself upright, the laughter draining quickly from her face. "Oh! Tayna, was it? Well that's just priceless!" She turned to the other two people in the hallway: crazy-eyed Sister Anthrax and a short, ill-kempt and rather hairy looking man. Tayna couldn't recall seeing him before.

"Get a load of this bunch!" she said. "They actually thought you were parents, coming up here to visit them!" The man chuckled non-committally, as though he wasn't sure exactly what the joke was, but Sister Anthrax threw herself into her own convulsions of laughter as Regalia turned back to the girls. The faces that had so recently been beaming with excitement, were now beginning to lose their focus, as the girls realized that this Smile Parade might not be proceeding

according to plan. Rachel was the only one who didn't seem to understand and she was busily snapping pictures of anybody and everybody with her toy camera while the scene played out around her.

"Hasn't anybody told you?" Regalia asked the group, while snatching the toy from Rachel's hand and tossing it into the garbage pail next to the door. "You're the Unlovables. Don't you know what that means?" She looked up and down the line. "It means that it isn't possible for any worthwhile person to actually love you. Why on Earth would I waste my time bringing people up here to meet children as hopeless as you? I've got much better things to do with my time, you can be sure." Her keen eyes flicked past the girls to the tables, still laden with unfinished tasks. "And by the looks of it, so have you. Now stop this ridiculousness and get back to work." Then she turned to her companions. "Never mind. We don't need to look in here after all," she said. "Once you've seen one storage room full of rejects and throw-aways, you've seen them all." With that, she turned and marched out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her with a bang.

The Smile Parade was still half formed. None of the girls was sure what to do next. Some turned uncertainly to the left or right, looking at their neighbors as if they might have some kind of plan. One or two of the younger girls sobbed, but nobody said a word. Rachel quietly walked over to the door and retrieved her camera from the garbage. When it became clear that no one was going to jump out and yell "Just kidding!," the girls finally drifted back toward their chores, but they did not all take their disappointment in good stride.

"Nice going, Eliza," Dana said. "Now we know why everybody calls you 'Lies'."

"Yeah, I think they must have been movie stars," Jenny said.

"No. It was definitely the King and Queen," said a third.

"Yeah, the royal couple from downtown Ugliville."

Eliza ignored the catcalls. Next to Tayna, she had been there the longest, so it would have been understandable if she, of all the girls, was the most crestfallen to discover that they were not going to be interviewed after all. But if there was one thing an Unlovable learned early, it was that life under the Good Sisters of Salvation seldom paid

off in smiles. By now, they'd all had plenty of practice bouncing back from disappointments—especially Eliza, who still allowed her imagination to torment her with visions of a sunnier future, an instinct that all the other girls had long since learned to suppress. If this latest kick in the shins had left any mark on her, it was completely invisible as she went quietly back to her job, sewing crests onto the clean, new uniforms that were to be given by the Sisters to the lower-floors girls for Christmas.

While Eliza was diving back into her needle work, Tayna watched her out of the corner of her eye, to be sure she was okay. This place could get under your skin real fast if you let it, and lesson number one in avoiding Sister Regalia's patented Sucking Vortex of Despair™ was that you had to think about life in her "care" as open warfare—a war in which ridicule was the enemy's chief weapon. Being the most spirited of the Unlovables, Tayna and Eliza had always been the primary targets of Regalia's campaign. Nothing attracted barrages of Goody-Goody ridicule like a rebellious imagination or a strong will. It was this constant fire that had forged the two girls into inseparable friends—comrades-in-arms against all manner of nunnish tyranny. Secretly, though, each of them was convinced that it was the other girl who got the worst of it, and unlike the injuries caused by swords or guns, despair wounds could only hurt if you let them. With the help of a good friend, they could be shaken off quite easily. But you had to catch them early, before they had a chance to burrow into your brain, so each girl took pains to watch the other for early warning signs, and as far as Tayna could tell, Lies was scarcely even aware of the verbal daggers being thrown her way by the other frustrated girls. Harmless toys, compared to the arsenal generally employed by the Goodies.

Now, you might think that with a name like "the Good Sisters of Salvation," the women running the Home would be your typical, cheerful, hard-working group of Jesus-freaks in Batman capes, but you'd be wrong. Most people called them the Goody-Goody Sisters, or even just "the Goodies", but it was used only as a short form. They weren't actually implying that the Sisters were good people. In point of fact, the old crones were about as horrible as you could imagine, and

it was a galaxy-sized joke that the universe even allowed these Harpies within a hundred miles of any children, let alone permitting them to run an orphanage—even one as flea-bitten and decrepit as Our Lady of Divine Suffering’s Home for Orphans and Evictees. In all her years of incarceration there, Tayna had never met a single evictee. In fact, to the best of her knowledge, only two of the words in the organization’s entire name even came close to being accurate: “orphans” and “suffering.” But it was better than living in a burned out car under a highway overpass. Wasn’t it?

Tayna sighed and bent back down over her work, putting more vigor into it than she felt. There were only two hours to go before she had to make her collection rounds, and she’d still have to be back in time to supervise dinner. Friday was always a very busy day for the senior Unlovable.



Late that afternoon, Tayna’s collections were almost done. Rain fell in relentless sheets, dragging the bleakness from the sky and spattering it across the sidewalks and low-income apartments, increasing the shabbiness of the city with every drip. An old, yellow taxi pulled up in front of a particularly horrific looking building. It was a squat gray, concrete structure with iron bars on the windows and a rusting, barbed wire fence running around the yard. Tayna shuddered as she stepped out into the rain. Like all the other buildings run by the Goodies, it looked like it had once been a maximum security prison or maybe a mental hospital, but unless somebody told you, you would never have guessed that it was actually a private school. Holy Terror Collegiate. Tayna couldn’t imagine what sort of people would send their children to a place like that, but clearly, somebody did.

The front of the building was almost face-like—the enormous, hulking structure had only two windows, set high on the upper floor, and a tiny, surprised looking mouth of a door, set back from the sidewalk at ground level. Even the building itself couldn’t hide its surprise at being allowed to eat children every morning. Tayna went up to that little iron mouth

and knocked. Before she could even rub the flecks of rust from her knuckles, the door jerked back, squealing piteously on its ancient iron hinges. Fierce gray eyes peered out from the gloom.

“You’re late!”

Tayna knew better than that. There was no schedule for her to keep, other than to be back at the Old Shoe before dinner time. Not for the first time, she wondered if it was possible that the kids at Holy Terror might have even worse lives than she did. Sure, they might have homes and families, but they couldn’t have very *loving* families—not if they were forced to spend their days here. But, of course, Tayna said nothing of that to the eyes watching her from the gloomy interior.

“I’m sorry, Sister Inquisita, there was a traffic accident and we had to come by the other bridge.” One thing about Tayna was that she never lied. Not quite, but she was very good at making true statements that encouraged other people to leap to untrue conclusions on their own. Take this comment about the traffic accident, for example. Sure, there *had* been an accident and they *had* come by the other bridge, but those two things had not happened on the same day, and neither of them had happened today. If the glowering nun wanted to jump to the conclusion that they had happened today, and that such a combination of events somehow constituted an excuse for being late, that was hardly any of Tayna’s concern.

“Hmph!” the nearly invisible nun said, but she pulled the door open a fraction wider and thrust a gold-colored urn out through the door. “Tell Regalia that they only filled one this week. The power has been out since Thursday, but the little sprats will have three filled next week to make up the shortfall or I’m going to—”

Tayna cut her off before she could finish. One thing she knew for certain about the Goody-Goodies was that they never made idle threats. This didn’t keep them from making up outlandish punishments to motivate the children under their care, though. It just meant that they were particularly persistent when it came to following through on whatever horrible consequences they had invented. Never let it be said that a Goody-Goody had failed to deliver on a promise. So Tayna cut her short, hoping to protect the kids inside, if only just a little.

“I’m sure that will be fine, Sister Inquisita. Two urns per week is still a very good average.”

The steely eyes continued to glare from behind the door, but not another word followed. Then, with a snort of satisfaction, they vanished and the door clanged shut.

“Lovely talking to you, too,” Tayna said to the cold, rusty door. Then she turned and went back to the waiting taxi, setting the urn on the seat beside her. It clanked noisily against the urns that she had picked up earlier from Sister Gruesome at the funeral home. No one had ever told her what was in them, or why they needed to be collected every week and taken to the Old Shoe, but the lids were sealed and she knew better than to ask. Any question deemed “nosy” or “impudent” by the Goodies was quick to earn a beating or some harsh chore assignment. Tayna found that she usually learned more, and truer information by simply using her brain and paying attention, but so far, that had not paid off with any of the juicy details about the urns. “Probably dead monkey fetuses,” was her usual answer, whenever the topic came up among the girls, in bed after Failing Light. That was the one time of day when the Unlovables had a moment to themselves, to think or to talk quietly. Something about lying in the dark waiting for sleep to come seemed to loosen the tongues of even the most work-weary children.

But what was in them? Eventually, Tayna tore her gaze from the metal jars and looked out through the rain-spattered window at the face of Holy Terror as the feelings of dread welled up inside her. I hope it’s nothing bad. Then she gave herself a shake. Who am I trying to kid? Of course it’s something bad. Nothing good ever comes from the Goodies. She sighed heavily and traced a raindrop with her finger as it ran down the glass.

“We can go back now,” she said.

The taxi pulled smoothly away from the curb as lightning flashed and a rumble of thunder boomed its disapproval. Even the sky didn’t want her going back to that miserable old place.

Tayna never noticed the tall, oddly dressed figure standing motionless in the rain, watching from an empty lot. But he had definitely noticed her.

As the taxi reached the end of the block, the mysterious watcher stepped out from behind a pile of broken cinder blocks to follow behind on foot.



It was almost six o'clock by the time Tayna had unloaded the urns and delivered them to Sister Regalia's office, and all the other children were seated at their tables, waiting for dinner. The Old Shoe had five floors, not counting the dining hall and kitchen in the basement, or the roof-top garden. On the ground floor were the nun's offices, and the classrooms in which the girls did their schoolwork. The second floor was the Sisters' Residence where the nuns slept and held their private parties. Most of the girls—the Old Shoe was a girls-only establishment—lived on the third and fourth floors. Each floor was divided into two wards. Infant and toddler wards were on the third floor, where they could be close to the nuns. Then juniors, aged five to ten, shared the fourth level with the older, senior girls. Each ward consisted of a communal dorm room, a bathroom and an activity room. The dining hall was also arranged according to the ward system and there was no mingling permitted between tables.

Fifth floor girls—the so-called Unlovables—ranged in age all the way from toddler to senior and it was their job to help in the kitchens, do the laundry and serve meals to all the other residents. They would eat only after everyone else had finished and after all the dishes had been done. As senior girl of the fifth floor, it was Tayna's job to supervise these tasks. On Fridays, when she was out collecting the urns, she was permitted to put someone else in charge of dinner preparations until she got back, but she was still responsible for anything her deputies did—or didn't do—while she was gone. So after looking around to be sure that everything in the dining hall was okay, Tayna went into the kitchen to find her assistant, Lies.

Eliza Drummel was second in seniority. She was two months younger and had been at the Old Shoe for nine years—almost as long as Tayna herself. She was a thin, slightly mousy girl with an active imagination, and she shared it with her ward-mates with an intensity that was often

mistaken for either lying or insanity, depending on who you asked. That's why everybody pretty much called her Lies. You could never tell whether what she was saying was true, or just another part of some fanciful distraction she had invented for herself. As far as Tayna was concerned, with Lies around, who needed TV?

Tayna found her lieutenant busy pulling plates out of the enormous army-surplus dishwasher. Becky was helping. She was one of the shortest girls in the whole place, even though she was nearly twelve, and she was rather sensitive about it, which caused trouble from time to time because she was aggressive and surly, even at the best of times.

It was Becky who first saw Tayna come in. She nudged Lies. "Look who's back." Deputy Eliza looked up and then snapped herself to attention, saluting her returning commander with a sloppy ladle.

Tayna smiled and saluted back. "Generalissimo Tayna, returning to duty. Colonel Drummel, you are relieved. What's on the menu?"

Lies leaned in and made a gruesome face. "It's Sister Disgustia Stew," she said, referring to the cranky old cook. "I snuck up behind her with a hammer and . . ."

"Eww! That's disgusting!" Becky shouted.

"Not 'disgusting'," Lies said. "Disgustia."

Tayna laughed at the thought of actually cooking one of the hairy old nuns. "She would probably taste like fried dryer lint," she said. Becky harumphed and went to load the serving cart, rather than listen to any more crazy talk. Lies grinned at Tayna and then followed after Becky to help with the cart. In no time at all, Tayna and her crew were busy marching up and down the long table rows, ladling out bowls of beef chili with fresh bread and setting them in front of the impatient diners who immediately dug in with noisy abandon.

By the time everyone had been fed, the dishes stacked and the dining hall tidied up, Tayna and the rest of the Unlovables were sitting wearily at the kitchen prep-table, eating the last of the stew and the few left-over heels of bread. Rachel, who was technically too young for the job but insisted on helping with cleanup anyway, was leaning heavily against Tayna, losing her ongoing struggle to stay awake. The toy camera hung loosely from the cord around her neck and Tayna could feel the warm

dampness of the little girl's breath on her skin through the thin material of her own shirt.

"The Rake is gone," she said to the others. "I'm going to take her up to bed." But Rachel must not have been completely asleep because at that point she stirred, mumbling something about still having to put her laundry away.

"It's okay, kiddo," Tayna said. "I'll do it for you tonight. You need to sleep. Okay?"

"Kay, Tayna." But before she could say "Thank you," the thin little girl was fast asleep.



Tayna turned out the light and closed the door. Already, she could hear the other girls coming up the stairs from dinner. Soon, the youngest would be climbing into their beds alongside Rachel, and then Tayna and the seniors would retire to the activity room to get some more of their mending and cleaning chores done before their own Failing Light. On the floors below, the more "adoptable" kids would all be sitting in neat little rows in their own activity rooms now, attending to the only evening chore the Goodies ever assigned them: watching television. "Best thing for a young mind," the nuns liked to say. "Healthy, edutainment programming. Two hours each morning and three more after dinner. Can't grow up right without proper knowledge of the world around you, and what better way to get it?"

If anybody needed proof of their sincerity, they only had to look here on the fifth floor, where there wasn't a television in sight—a clear indication that, in the collected minds of the Good Sisters of Salvation, TV truly must be a good thing. That couldn't manage to cut the fifth-floor girls completely off from the modern world, though. Unlovables still got to see plenty of TV while cleaning the other girls' lounges, or the Goody-Goody party room. Then there were the magazines lying around—the Goodies were always reading—celebrity gossip and rumors, mostly. Everything else was just filth, and not to be tolerated.

Tayna had completed her book-spine repair job that afternoon, so

she was busy looking for her next project, but this time her heart wasn't really in it. There were times when what she really wanted to do was grab a marker and scribble all over the damned things, or tear their pages out one by one, imagining each book to be a Goody in disguise. But then she'd take a deep breath and remind herself that such defiance would only end up hurting the other kids. It probably wouldn't affect the nuns at all, and in her view, that would make her just as bad as the Goodies. So Tayna set aside her dreams of petty vengeance and dove back into the pile of injured texts. She would just continue waging her private little war, undoing as much Goody-damage as she could until they kicked her out. She was still trying to decide which book in the pile was most salvageable when the other girls began drifting in to resume their own chores. A few of them glanced oddly at her as they took their seats, but she barely noticed.

"I tell you, it's true," Lies said as she came through the door with Becky and Marie. "I could hear them, plain as day. I took Regalia's dinner up to her, but there was somebody in there with her, so I set it on the table in the hall. The door was open a crack and I could see some woman sitting in the visitor's chair." Whatever Lies was talking about, the girls around her were spellbound.

"The woman did all the talking," Lies said. "Something about knowing in her bones that there was 'a girl here who needed her, the one who'd been here the longest, who might have given up hope of ever getting adopted. Not some primping princess, but the most lonely, the most desperate, the most despairing girl in the entire place.'" As Lies repeated those words, every girl in the room was looking at Tayna, their eyes wide with envy. Then Becky broke the spell.

"Yeah, right. Lies-R-Us is just making stuff up again. Like the rich lady in the fur coat, remember? What happened to the limo and all the jewelry, huh? Turned out to be some hairy little monkey-man and Sister Anthrax—not what I'd call choice mommy-daddy material, were they?"

Lies protested. "I'm not making it up," she said. "Sure, this afternoon I made a mistake. I saw a man and a woman in the stairwell and her musty old habit looked like fur in the darkness, but there was a fancy car out front, even if nobody else saw it. And when have I ever made up

whole conversations, huh?” One or two of the girls seemed inclined to side with her, but Becky just snorted.

“Oh, gimme a break!”

But even though Becky seemed to turn her attention to her sewing work, Tayna couldn't help but notice that the angry girl kept stealing glances her way. Great. As if she didn't have enough pressure. Tayna knew that things like this, like interviews and adoptions, never happened to girls like her, and now she was going to be the center of everyone else's envy until this latest opportunity proved the rule by blowing up in her face. Still, she sighed, wouldn't it be nice if, just this once, something did go her way? The rest of the evening passed quietly for Tayna as two more damaged books were reclaimed from the heap of shame, but she hardly saw them at all.

Was it possible, after giving up hope for so long, that she might actually be worthy of a loving home?



Outside, the thin man gazed at the Old Shoe from the deep recesses of the alley across the street. It had been a long walk from Holy Terror, yet he showed no outward sign of his exertion. He watched with apparent surprise as an older couple walked out the front door, arm in arm, chatting in animated tones. then his fascination doubled two hours later, when another man stepped quickly from his car and dashed up the steps to disappear inside. These relatively innocuous events somehow excited him, but there was one last thing he saw—invisible to anyone else who might have been watching—that thrilled him to the very core. In his mind's eye, the Old Shoe roared and twisted, engulfed in brilliant, ravenous, multicolored flame. He wriggled with delight and settled himself back into the shadows to wait for his chance.

chapter 2



That night, Tayna had a dream. Rising from her bed, she floated silently across the room with her arms stretched out to either side. Her fingertips gently brushed the walls as she drifted out into the hall. Two bare feet hung limply below the hem of her nightgown and her toes bumped idly against the hardwood floors as she rose up and then dipped back down, in time with the slow in and out of each breath.

Her eyes saw nothing. In fact, they were closed, but within the dream, she could still see herself, drifting along the hall and down the stairs, as though she was a little bird, hovering silently near the ceiling above and behind her sleeping self. Down, down she went, past the other floors of girls, past the party on the Goody-Goody level, past Regalia's ground-floor office and down into the basement. She drifted calmly through the dining hall and beyond, into the kitchen. At the back wall, next to the large, walk-in freezer, she came to a small door that she had never noticed before. It swung silently open and she swept past it into a small, brightly lit chamber.

Her body floated around the perimeter of the room, facing the walls, revealing nothing but the rough, orange brick surface that occasionally scraped her nose. Behind her, in the middle of the secret room, she could hear things: a man talking in muffled tones, the drone of a television turned down low and something else that sounded like wind chimes, but

no matter how hard she strained and twisted, she could not turn to see. Frustration forced a sob from her straining body. She was certain that if she didn't somehow discover what was in that room, bad things were going to happen. The answer was so close. Right there behind her.

Tayna continued to struggle against her invisible restraints, even as her nose continued its tour of the musty brick work. When at last she had completed her circuit of the room, a wave of relaxation washed over her and she drifted back out through the still-open door, which closed again behind her. Back across the empty hall she went, retracing her path up the stairs, level after level and finally returning to her dorm where her body sank back down to the bed.

She tried to keep the dream and all its parts fixed in her mind. It felt so important, as though she was the only person in the world who could figure it out, but even as she tried to study them, the events and details evaporated like mist in the garden. Before long she lost the battle completely and slipped reluctantly into a deep but troubled sleep.



Dear Shammi:

Wasn't that the weirdest dream? I know you must have seen it, since you're supposed to be watching over my thoughts and everything. If only I could see what was in that room. Figuring that out felt like only the most important thing ever. And what room was that, anyway? I've been in the kitchen a million times and there's nothing there—just a brick wall. But there I go, don't I, taking a stupid dream and expecting it to make sense. Maybe it's just a stupid dream. Or I could be cracking up.

Oh, guess what? I think I'm going to have an interview! Lies heard a mommy-be talking about wanting to meet "the girl who's been here just forever." Well everybody knows I'm the queen of that country! She didn't hear anything about a him though, but there's always a him. Wannadads and mommy-bes: get your own matched set, available in all this fall's hottest colors Not sold separately. Offer void where prohibited by nuns. The Goodies don't even let solos come into the building, which is too bad, 'cause I'm sure there are probably some really cool mono-moms

out there. We could be all buddy-buddy and have girls-only movie nights every night, with popcorn and soda and candles . . .

Aww, who am I kidding? I haven't even seen her yet. When was the last time one of the Unlovables even got an interview, huh? It's so . . . unnatural. The other girls are looking at me like I've got a goat's hoof sticking out of my forehead or something. I still don't really know what's going on, but keep your fingers crossed for me, okay?

Hmm. Do you even have fingers? What does a child-watching god look like, anyway? Interventions are still in your job description, though, right? Do you need fingers for that? What about arms? Legs? For all the help you've been in my life, you might just as well be a multiple amputation victim. What's the matter? My existence isn't pathetic enough for you yet? What does it take to get a little divine meddling around here!

God, I am such a freak! And now, as if I didn't already have enough wrong with me, I think my ears are starting to swell up. They're really sore. Who gets pain of the earlobe, anyway? Maybe I'm getting the plague. That would be intense, wouldn't it? Would you get involved then?

Sometimes I wish you would just give me a sign—show me that you're actually out there, on the job, listening and all. Then I think, no, don't answer that. I'm not sure I could stand to find out if you aren't real. I've been keeping this journal for years now, but still the only writing in here is mine. So I'm just wondering: if you don't write letters and you don't do personal appearances, how am I going to know it's you when you finally show up?

Oh. Right. You'll be the all-powerful being with no arms and no legs. What was I thinking?

Keep your ears on,

T.



Tayna trudged slowly down the stairs, looking curiously at the walls and steps, as though she were only now seeing them for the first time. When she finally reached the dining hall for breakfast, she was almost ten minutes late.

“Well, look who’s so important that she feels she can keep us all waiting until she graces us with her presence.” Sister Regalia glared at her from her place at the head of the fourth-floor table. Everybody knew the senior girls were her favorites.

“Well? Sit down girl! I’ll not let these fine young ladies starve another moment to convenience you.”

Tayna didn’t bother to point out that Sister Regalia and her seniors were all sitting in front of half-empty bowls. Instead, she made her way silently over to the Unlovables table. At the far end, two places were vacant. Those girls were on breakfast duty today. By now, they’d be elbows deep in the porridge pot, sucking down their own hasty breakfast in the kitchen before the avalanche of dishes started washing over them. But at least they were excused from their first lesson period of the day. It wasn’t a lot of time, but it was usually enough to get the chore done. The Unlovables rotated breakfast and lunch duties, with two different girls assigned to breakfast and two more to lunch each day.

Sister Regalia finished her breakfast at the same time as the last girl at the senior table, which was not a big surprise. By nature she was as ravenous as a leopard but she usually managed to hold off the last mouthful or two until most of her favorites had finished. Never, however, did she go out of her way to wait for any of the Unlovables, even though they always got their meals last, and today she caught nearly all of them only half-way through their porridge.

“A few items for today, children.” Meal time was now officially over. Tayna was sure she saw Sister Regalia smirk in delight when Dana and Jenny groaned in protest. They had made the mistake of chatting instead of eating, but the Sister Superior was not about to back down for a pair of Unlovables.

“First, a word about the televisions . . .” She looked around the room, waiting to be sure she had everyone’s attention. When the muttering had died down, she continued. “I expect you to remember that they are to be left on the channels that I have set them to. They are there for your education, not for your amusement.” Sister Regalia’s face twisted in distaste at the thought. “Television time is from seven o’clock until bedtime. You are to be seated, in your group lounges, watching the

approved programming during those hours unless you have been assigned other duties. Is that perfectly clear?"

By reflex, the entire dining hall chanted in reply. "Yes, Sister." Sister Regalia grunted her satisfaction and moved on.

"Secondly, we have a number of visitors lined up for today. As usual, those of you who are to have interviews will be summoned from your classrooms at the appropriate time, so I expect every girl to keep herself presentable at all times. You never know," she said, looking several girls in the eye at random, "today might be *your* day." Tayna felt her insides turn to butter. Today! How long had she been hearing those words and hoping they might be meant for her? And if Lies was right, today *was* the day. She felt both excited and terrified at the same time.

"That will be all. Off to your classes."

Everybody was talking excitedly and none more so than the Unlovables themselves. By now, they had all heard the rumors and their heads kept turning furtively to peek at Tayna, who tried her best to ignore the attention. She had almost reached the stairs when she felt the grip of a clawed hand on her shoulder.

"A word with you, girl."

Tayna was too startled to speak. This is it! She nodded meekly and followed Sister Regalia through the flow of bodies, up the staircase and into her office. The old nun sat at her desk and Tayna, long-since accustomed to the protocol, assumed her position in front of the desk with her hands clasped in front. She didn't have to wait long though. The Sister Superior considered silence golden—except for her own.

"Sister Diaphana is having some trouble with the basil. She's asked me if you might be excused from class to assist her." Tayna blinked. Basil?

"But I thought . . ."

Sister Regalia cackled. "Oh? Your little friend told you what she overheard last night, did she?" Her expression made it clear that she was enjoying Tayna's confusion. "And you thought the pushy little doll woman meant she wanted to see *you*, is that it?" Tayna couldn't help herself. She nodded. "O ho! I thought so. And you have so much experience with visitors that you trust your own thoughts in the matter, do you?" Tayna felt crushed. Lies had got it wrong after all.

“Well,” said Sister Regalia. “I’ll have you know that *nobody* comes into this establishment and tells me who they want to see. I make all the decisions around here, and don’t you forget it. Nothing could possibly convince me to risk our sterling reputation by having any of our visitors meeting the likes of you. Nothing.” Regalia watched Tayna carefully until she was certain that all spark of hope had been smothered, then she softened. Slightly. “Now, as I was saying, Sister Diaphana has been having trouble with the basil. She wondered if you might be excused from classes to help her, although I’m sure I have no idea what possible use you might be. Still . . .” Regalia paused as though she was studying a complicated calendar in her head before continuing. “I suppose even a complete klutz like you can help with digging and shoveling or whatever daft nonsense that woman has in mind for you. So, go find her and do whatever you can to help tidy up her little mess. I trust you can find her?”

Tayna’s heart was in tatters. She hadn’t realized just how much she had come to believe in Lies’s latest tale, nor how desperately she had wanted the chance, just the slimmest chance, to find a mother who would take her away from this hideous place. She thought she had successfully buried those impossible fantasies years ago, but rather than give Regalia the satisfaction of seeing her misery, Tayna grabbed at her invisible wrist-bracelet instead and twisted her frustrations down into it. There was no real bracelet there of course—invisible or otherwise. It was just some silly habit she’d picked up as a child—a way of calming herself down when she was feeling stressed—but she’d been doing it for so long now that she no longer even noticed herself doing it. Still, it wouldn’t be good for Regalia to see how easily she had been brought back to the edge of hope.

“Diaphana isn’t all that difficult to find,” she said.

When Regalia dismissed her with a wave of her hand, Tayna stormed out of the office. She was so tired of being pressed under the thumb of that self-important harpy. Even after a few more twists of her bracelet, she still wanted to scream, throw things, maybe even hurt a basketful of puppies. She stopped. Then she giggled. Puppies? She had never been any good at nurturing a good rage. Whenever she tried, she eventually

came up with absurd images like that, which ruined the whole effect. She just didn't have a knack for anger. Tayna grinned a goofy grin at herself and cocked an ear to listen for Sister Diaphana. Imagine. Puppies.

“Whoops! Oh, my.”

Of all the Goody-Goodies Tayna knew, Sister Diaphana was the only one she could honestly call harmless. She was a large woman. Her habit billowed out around her like a tarpaulin caught on a boulder in a hurricane, and her voice was as big as her frame, which made her extremely easy to find. Classroom 1.

“Oh, hello Tayna, dear. I was just clearing up the board in here and I think I've made a frightful mess.”

Indeed, Sister Diaphana was covered from head to ankle in yellow chalk dust. As she strained to reach the writing at the top of the board with the eraser, her ample frame saw to it that everything written below the level of her shoulder was transferred directly to her robes.

In a nicer world, Sister Diaphana might have been that one, warm soul who made living in the Old Shoe bearable for girls like Tayna. But, sadly, Sister Diaphana never seemed to be completely in the world—not the real one, anyway. Have you ever known someone who laughed for no reason at all or carried on conversations with the empty air? That was Sister Diaphana. Sometimes, when she really seemed to be with you, she was very sweet and motherly, but then there were other times when she seemed to be lost in a world that only she could see, one that didn't even have you in it. Either way, she was too out of touch with what was going on around her to guide or protect any of the older children, though she was quite good with the infants.

So instead of having the mentor she so genuinely needed, Tayna could only take pity on the poor woman and do what she could to protect her from the more savage pranks and humiliations heaped upon her by the other Sisters. For example, Sister Anthrax's favorite joke was to use a long pointer to write meaningless sentences across the top of the board after teaching a class. Then she would pretend to have some urgent errand and ask Sister Diaphana to clean the board for her. It was a sport she never tired of, but poor Diaphana never seemed to catch on.

“Come on, Sister. Let’s get you tidied up and then go see about your basil.”

Sister Diaphana sparkled at the suggestion. “That would be wonderful, dear. It’s been giving me such trouble this week.”



At the very top of the stairwell, above even the fifth floor, a heavy iron door let them out onto the roof, at the rear of the building. Tayna led the way around the little hut that capped the stairwell and went directly to the edge of the old pool that now served as the orphanage’s sunken, rooftop garden. She was already partway down the ladder before she noticed that Diaphana was no longer with her. A noise from the flag pole caught her attention and she whipped her head around. Horror grew in her eyes and she swarmed back up the ladder. The portly Sister was at the front of the building, leaning out over the edge of the roof, with one arm clutching the rickety old pole, and the other waving wildly in the air.

“Yoo hoo! Yoo hoo! Hello Duck Man! Thank you for your help but I have Tayna now! She’s very good with the plants you know! She’ll fix everything! Bye bye!” And then she swung back around, coming very near to toppling herself off the edge in the process, but Tayna was there just in time to grab her by her flailing arm.

“Oh my God, Sister! What was that all about?” Diaphana gazed serenely back at her, clearly unsure what Tayna was referring to.

“With the flag pole!” Tayna said. “The whole ‘Yoo hoo! Duck Man!’ thing.” She gave a fair impersonation of Sister Diaphana swinging precariously from a rusty pole while waving the other arm over her head.

“Oh, do you know the Duck Man too, dear?” Tayna sighed. Conversations with the big Sister often went this way.

“No, Sister. I don’t know him. Is he nice?”

“Oh. I don’t know that I’d call him ‘nice’, dear.” Then she leaned in close and lowered her voice. “Between you and me, he’s a bit odd.” Tayna suppressed a grin. Coming from Sister Diaphana, she didn’t even want to guess what that might mean. She tried again.

“Where do you know him from? Does he live near here?” Tayna’s full attention had been on the flailing nun. She hadn’t seen who the waving was directed at, if indeed there had been anyone there at all.

“Oh, yes, dear,” Sister Diaphana replied, “He lives right there across the street. In the alley. At least, he’s living there for now.”

Tayna did not like the sound of that. “You mean, there’s a strange man living in the alley next to the orphanage? Sister, are you sure he’s real? How did you meet him? You haven’t been outside in a month.”

“Of course he’s real, child. I spoke to him last night in this very garden. He can’t talk, poor dear, but he offered to help me with the basil today, only I don’t need his help now, do I? Now that you’re here.” Tayna was getting seriously creeped out. Some weirdo had actually been climbing around on the roof?

“Why do you call him ‘Duck Man?’ Does he have feathers?”

Sister Diaphana smiled. “Oh, no, dear. Don’t be silly. He was quite tall and very distinguished looking with his nice beard, and he wore a long pink coat.. Come to think of it, maybe he thought it was going to rain. He was wearing long rubber pants, too. They came all the way up to his chest, and he had his coat tucked inside to keep it dry. Oh. And he had the most darling hat on his head. It had a bright yellow bill, and big googly eyes on the front—just like a duck.”

By the time Sister Diaphana had finished her description, Tayna’s fears had subsided. Nobody dressed like that could have survived for long on these streets without getting picked up. This Duck Man sounded like just another one of the fantastical people who inhabited Diaphana’s invisible world. Tayna put the matter behind her and went to inspect the garden.

Most people would not expect basil to be a viable crop in a city-bound, rooftop garden—especially in November—but such people were not making allowances for whose garden this was. Sister Diaphana was the gardener of record. She was a sympathetic soul, in her way, and in a more stable person that would have given her a greener thumb than the average nun enjoyed, but even that would not have been enough to bring herbs and flowers to full bloom at the bottom of an abandoned swimming pool on a windy roof, with the chill of winter

beginning to set in. While Sister Diaphana got all the official credit, everybody knew that this was really Tayna's garden.

It had been several days since Tayna had last found the time to visit her refuge, and in that time it appeared that Sister Diaphana had been busy, although, what she thought she had been doing was anybody's guess. Tayna's garden was not generally the orderly and regimented grid-work of plants that most people associated with modern, efficient horticulture. Instead, it was a riot of chaotic associations, seemingly clumped in random patches. Roses climbed the stalks of tomato plants, herbs sprouted from the crotches of tree branches. There was even a vertical row of carrots growing from a crack in the wall between the old tiles. But somehow, under Tayna's careful guidance, it all just worked.

Or, at least, it usually did. Today, mayhem was strewn about her carefully managed chaos. Yellow bits of rope were tied to various shrubs and stakes and then trailed out randomly across the beds. A water cistern had been turned on its side and rolled through the cabbages. And there, in the corner, where the basil normally flourished, was a large, square patio stone, smack on top of the herb patch.

Tayna sighed. "What have you been up to, Sister?" It was a rhetorical question. She didn't expect an answer, but she got one anyway.

"Regalia wanted to have a patio, dear. I did my best. Do you like it?"

Tayna felt a brief flare of anger. Sister Regalia. She might have known, but the hopeful expression on Sister Diaphana's face doused her anger. As usual, there was a pile of work to be done and a shortage of volunteers, so Tayna pulled up her shirt sleeves and set to work.

"Come on then, Sister. We've got our job cut out for us today, haven't we? And I think," she added with a friendly grin, "that I know what's been troubling the basil."

The hours of the day slipped away while Tayna set about, restoring order to her sanctuary. The stakes and ropes were the first to go. Then she righted the cistern and with Diaphana's help, shoved it back into its corner where it could collect rainwater that sometimes poured in off the roof. They even got the patio slab levered up and off the herbs.

And that's when her real work began.

Most gardeners would have given up on all the crushed and tattered plants, but not Tayna. Starting from scratch would take weeks. Besides, you don't shoot people just because somebody beat them with a rock, do you? Why should it be any different with vegetables?

For hours Tayna worked her way through the beds, propping up stems here, stroking leaves there. She was really quite good at it and before the day was out, all the members of her little chorus were singing again. True, a few of them were still shaky and off-key, but they'd be fine with another day or two of attention. She squinted up at the sun, sinking now toward the western wall. "Well, we'd best get back inside, Sister. It will soon be time for supper."

After ensuring that Sister Diaphana found her way back down to the ground floor, Tayna hurried to her dorm to get cleaned up. She came through the door just in time to see Lies, standing in the middle of a crowd of girls, wearing her best outfit and talking at a hundred miles an hour.

"Lies?" Tayna said. "What are you guys doing here? Who's downstairs on dinner prep?" The girls didn't even hear her. As soon as Lies saw Tayna, she came running forward, waving her arms excitedly in the air.

"Oh, Tayna, they're fabulous! Just exactly like we've always imagined. They're so polite, and friendly. They actually wanted to know about my life! Can you believe it? Nothing at all like the Goody-Goodies. I told them all about you and the stuff we've done and they asked questions and everything. Oh this has just been the best day ever!"

Tayna had no idea what was going on, but obviously something exciting had happened. Or at least, Lies thought so. She laughed.

"Slow down, Lies. What's going on? Who's not like the Goodies?"

Lies just giggled in delight. "Why, Mr. and Mrs. Nackenfausch, of course. I had my interview today and they're everything we've always dreamed about in parents. They are just so cool! They run a hospital for dolls and she's a famous photographer and I think they're going to adopt me!"



Out in the alley, Duck Man pulled his hat lower on his head. He was crouched inside a dumpster. A bitter wind whistled along the streets,

forcing him to hunker deeper down into the garbage for warmth. He had seen her again, on the roof. And now *she* was burning too. His time was coming, his time to be with her. He felt it in his bones, he knew it. It was a good feeling, one that made him feel bubbly inside. He took an apple from his pocket and began to eat. He could wait. He was really good at that. Waiting. And watching.

All around him, the wind continued to howl.

chapter 3



Tayna turned away from Lies and her gaggle of admirers without saying a word and bolted from the room.

The dancing light of excitement dimmed in Eliza's eyes as her brow furrowed with confusion. "Tayna? What's wrong? Aren't you happy for me?" All the Unlovables in the room had fallen deathly quiet. From the end of the hall, the lonely sound of Tayna's feet pounding down the stairs was answer enough. Eliza's voice cracked and all the enthusiasm of a moment before was gone. "T? Come back. I'm sorry."

Her plea was never heard. As Eliza reached the basement of despair, Tayna was already committing a major offense from the Goody-Goody Book of Shalt Not, as she burst through the front doors of the Old Shoe and out onto the darkened street, unescorted. She didn't care where she went. It didn't matter, just as long as it was some place nunless. And Lies-less. She jammed her hands deep into the pouch of her hoody and stalked off to find it.

Tayna walked for a long time, oblivious to the turns she took or which abandoned buildings she passed. She avoided the more brightly lit areas, favoring the shadows in case the Goodies decided to come after her. The Old Shoe was not in one of the nicer neighborhoods, and the Goodies had always used that as an excuse to ban the children from going out into the streets. The few times she *had* been out, Tayna had

always been under the glare of a Sister or in the back of a taxi—always guided by some adult who knew where they were going. The only thing Tayna ever knew was the name of their destination, which was usually one of the other Goody-run institutions—Holy Terror or the Gruesome Harvest Mortuary—but those places might just as well have been floating on crackers in a vast sea of onion soup for all she knew about how to find them. As her blind fury began to fade, she looked around, and, for the first time in her life, Tayna realized just how little practical understanding she had of the world she lived in. Nothing was familiar.

Even if she had been here before, that would have been by daylight. She'd never be able to recognize it now. Your attention always gets drawn to the bright things. By day, that means things like shop signs, billboards and cars, but darkness has a way of changing what you notice. At night, the bright things are fewer and farther between and of an entirely different character: a section of sidewalk glowing beneath a rare, working street light; the glow of a television from a ground-floor apartment window; a flickering neon light over the doorway of a seedy bar. The more Tayna looked around, the more alien things became and the more uncertain she felt.

This unfamiliar world, filled with its sputters of harsh, unnatural light and backed by the smell of damp concrete and grime, suddenly felt . . . wrong. That instinct, which was her only guide now, gnawed at her for several blocks. Little by little, shadow by shadow, tinkle by tinkle of broken glass, it whispered in the back of her mind. Wrongness. Strangeness. Danger. Finally, when she reached the next corner, she'd had enough, and instead of continuing along her current course, Tayna turned and marched away from the electrified night of the avenue, drawn into the darker side-street by what? A smell?

The smell of leaves. Ahead of her, hanging above the sidewalk, she could almost make them out, winking and shimmering in the moonlight. A park. The nagging in her skull relaxed. This was something she understood. It reminded her of her rooftop garden, and, somehow, of childhood. When she finally reached the trees, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. She stepped off the sidewalk and into the blackness of the silent urban thicket.

At first, she felt soothed by the dense foliage, by the sounds and smells of greenery and life all around her, but the further she wandered into the trees, the more she realized that, even here, things were less than they seemed. The trees were all of the same kind, all the same size. There were very few animals and nothing at all larger than a squirrel. The grass showed no variety, no flowers, no weeds. There was no marsh or any hills. It was as though the entire wood had been planned by someone who had never actually seen a real forest. The vibrancy of life that had attracted her initially, turned out to be little more than illusion, just as bleak and uninspired as the electric lights and concrete had been.

“But this is crazy.” She spoke aloud, trying to make the trees around her feel less creepily silent. “This isn’t my first time in a park. It isn’t even my first time in the woods. And you trees are no different from any of the others I’ve seen. So why do you feel so strange all of a sudden?”

“It is your flower.” The voice was muffled by intervening leaves, but not many.

Tayna went still. There was someone else in the forest with her. And that someone was way too close.

“Who’s there?” she called out with more confidence than she felt.

“I have many names.”

This was shaping up into a trailer for a bad horror movie. Teenaged girl, walking alone at night in an abandoned city park hears creepy voices from out of the shrubbery. Definitely not a scene from a light comedy. This had slasher film written all over it.

“Where are you?” Something about the conversation felt odd, the way subtitled movies are odd, as you try to watch the actor’s lips and read the text at the same time, and she fidgeted nervously with her invisible bracelet. But despite her rising stress, she tried to keep her voice positive and naively curious, like she was honestly trying to find this psycho-dude. Meanwhile, she was backing up, retracing her steps as quickly and as quietly as she could manage, and glancing from side to side for a weapon. Anything.

“I am here,” said the voice, but this time it was not muffled by trees. The speaker had come out into open air and was now directly behind her.

Tayna whirled around to face him. And then she gasped. There,

standing in front of her, was the tall bearded man in rubber pants that Sister Diaphana had described. Duck Man. And he was reaching out to grab her.

No child can reach the age of thirteen in the modern world and not realize that this was a life or death situation. Nor can that child—especially a girl—have escaped hearing at least some of the details concerning how one should react. First, she screamed. Then she kicked as hard as she could. And then she ran. She was pretty sure her foot had made solid contact. There may even have been the reward of a satisfyingly surprised grunt from her assailant, but she didn't hang around to conduct any post-kick victim surveys. She just ran.

And she continued to run. After a while, she was surprised to discover that she had seemingly boundless reserves for running. In the end, she ran for what seemed like an hour and it was only when she realized that she recognized her surroundings that she stopped. She was right back where she'd started, standing on the street in front of the Old Shoe. Even though she didn't know the layout of the city, her subconscious must have been keeping better track of her route than she'd realized. When she had pressed her internal panic button, her brain had simply rewound the tape to the beginning. That was probably pretty cool, but right now she was too frazzled to care. A strange and entirely unexpected emotion flooded through her and it took a moment to realize what it was. She was glad to see the old dungeon.

Shuddering at the thought, she trudged up the steps and went back in where she belonged.



“You selfish, arrogant little sprat!”

It was late, after Failing Light, and Sister Regalia was in a high rage. She seemed to almost fly across the lobby when she saw Tayna walking past her office door. Never pretty, she was now terrifying to behold, all angular elbows and bony legs, gliding across the floor as though she was on rollers, with a heavy wooden rod raised above her head in a clenched fist. Regalia wasn't a particularly large woman, but she was densely built.

And hairy, let's not forget the hairy. Her ears could easily do with a good brushing and the only thing keeping her eyebrows from merging was sheer dogged persistence with her tweezers. If the wind had ever had the courage to blow the woman's habit up over her head, Tayna doubted anybody would notice. In all likelihood, the hair went all the way down. Still, with her recent experiences still fresh in her mind, Tayna wasn't much in the mood to fight. Instead, she hung her head in quiet submission, ready for the blow that she herself felt she deserved. But it never landed.

"Sister."

The sound of that calm, patient voice coming from Regalia's office did more than any team of draft horses could have done in that moment. They stopped the Sister Superior cold in her tracks.

"Am I to assume that this is the spirited young lady we have been so concerned about all evening?" Again the voice spoke, in fluid, appealing tones that seemed both compassionate and powerful, accustomed to being obeyed.

"Yes, sir," Sister Regalia replied.

Sir?

A small man stepped out of the Sister's office. Tayna recognized him as the man who had been touring the fifth floor the other day with Regalia and Anthrax, although he seemed to be much more expensively dressed now than he had been then. He wore a dark gray business suit that did a decent job of disguising his somewhat knobby shape. In his hand, he carried a white and equally knobby wooden staff, capped at both ends with little hand-carved skulls. Blood-red gemstones winked at her from the eye-sockets as he walked toward the immobile nun. He smiled warmly at Tayna and pushed Regalia's arm down gently with his staff.

"Come, Sister, surely you won't insist on beating her before I've had the pleasure of a chat."

He turned away from the Sister Superior with a decided air of dismissal. "Tayna, isn't it?" he said, inclining his head toward her. "Sister Regalia was just telling me all about your mysterious arrival and subsequent, shall we say 'energetic' history here. Since the Sister seems to

have taken temporary leave of her manners, allow me to introduce myself. I am Angiron. Well, Lord Angiron, actually.”

Tayna nearly choked. “She told you about my arrival?” In all the years Tayna had been living with the Goodies, nobody had ever told her even the skimpiest of details concerning how she had come to be there. The closest any had ever come was when Sister Inquisita had threatened to roast her “just as crisp and black as that other one.” But when Tayna had pressed for details, the viperous old hag had said, “Well, you’re not the only orphan in the world, are you? They’re not all lucky enough to have a good home and protection. I’m sure many have died, probably in gruesome accidents. *Very* gruesome, you can be sure.” Tayna had been seven at the time. Sister Inquisita disappeared later that same week. For years, Tayna had wondered what ever happened to the crusty old woman, but she hadn’t been able to learn a thing, until the day she became Senior Unlovable and made the first of many trips to collect the urns, and there she was, crotchety as ever, now apparently in charge of Holy Terror. Yet that one comment, made so many years ago, had been the only thing Tayna had ever heard that even hinted at her own secret, untold origin story. And you really had to stretch to even read *that* much into it. But now, here was some smooth-talking, twisted up little man casually talking about how much Sister Regalia had already told *him*. Tayna glared jets of fury at the Sister Superior. Lord Angiron’s gleaming eyes flicked perceptively from the orphan to the nun and back again.

“Am I to understand, Sister, that the young lady has been told nothing of her past?” Tayna’s expression was all the answer he needed. “Well then, let’s you and I have a little chat, shall we? One that no doubt is long overdue.” Then he turned away, beckoning for Tayna to follow him, while simultaneously shoos Sister Regalia out of her own office and striding past her.

Tayna followed him warily into the room, and closed the door behind her.

Even with the door closed, they could still hear Regalia sputtering in the hallway, but Angiron just smiled and seated Tayna in a very gentlemanly manner, before seating himself in the large office chair. He

gestured toward the door. “She does seem to be every inch the grounded harpy tonight, doesn’t she?” Tayna returned his ingratiating smile, with a cautious half-smile of her own.

“Well, my dear. I expect you have a great number of questions. I’m scarcely the most knowledgeable person to answer them, of course, but since the good Sister hasn’t seen fit to do so herself . . .” He let the words dangle there between them, like a life-preserver thrown just short of a drowning swimmer. All she had to do was reach out and take it, but that inner voice was still whispering words of warning to her. Danger. She held her tongue and watched him mistrustfully.

Lord Angiron waited, leaving a silence that begged to be filled. The oak desk loomed between them, and the coat rack in the corner, hanging darkly with one of Regalia’s old habits, seemed to glare at the young girl’s impudence, as though the nun herself was actually inside it. The silence stretched out and Angiron reached casually into a drawer, from which he withdrew a thin-bladed knife and began to trim his fingernails. Tayna watched his eyes peering at her from over top of the blade. They were dark, calculating eyes, hidden beneath a thick and almost furry brow. As much as she wanted to learn what he could tell her, she just didn’t trust those eyes. Instead of taking up the conversation, as he so clearly intended, Tayna raised her own eyebrows a trifle, challenging him—as if to say, “It’s your meeting. If you’ve got something to tell me, then get on with it.”

Angiron’s eyes widened in surprise, but he chuckled good-naturedly. “Well, you’re feisty enough. That’s for sure.” When she still said nothing, he shrugged and spread his arms genially. “This tale—at least, as much as I’ve heard of it—has precious little meat, I’m afraid. It’s likely to disappoint you, but as I understand, it was a foreigner who found you. He approached the city, late one night, having just arrived from some distance away.” He paused again, now picking at something in his teeth with the tip of the blade, then he pointed it at her in an off-hand way. “Now, what you must realize is that this was ten years ago, in the middle of winter. The poor man knew nothing of the local geography, nor the laws of the land. He claimed he saw something out of the corner of his eye while traveling on a dark and lonely stretch of

road. Upon investigating, what should he find but a small, nearly helpless child, alone in this world, save for himself and the howling coyotes.”

“Where did this happen?” Her tone could not disguise her curiosity.

Lord Angiron smiled more broadly, apparently pleased to have dragged her out of her silence. “On the north highway,” he said. “Somewhere near the old Indian museum, I believe.”

“Wasketawin,” Tayna said. “And then?”

“There isn’t much more to tell, my dear. A good deal of time was spent combing the area, but no evidence was ever uncovered that might suggest who you were, how you came to be there, or where your people might be found. With no family to be notified, your case was turned over to the skilled hands of the Good Sisters of Salvation, here. Quite a remarkable case, actually. It is common enough for them to *disappear*, but very unusual for a young girl of that age to *appear* without a trace. Had you spoken the language even slightly, perhaps the investigators might have learned enough about you to do more.” Tayna sat bolt upright in her chair.

“I didn’t speak English?” This news shocked her no less than if he had told her that she’d been found in the remains of a crashed rocket ship. “What language did I speak?”

“Well,” he said thoughtfully, “that was the puzzle, wasn’t it?”

Tayna looked at him warily. “What do you mean, ‘puzzle?’”

Lord Angiron waved a hand at the nameless, faceless perpetrators of bureaucracy. “None who were assigned to your case were ever able to fathom the language in the slightest. It was eventually assumed that you were merely imitating the idea of speech and had not yet, in fact, learned to talk at all.”

Tayna sat back to think about that for a moment and then a thought occurred to her. “Is that why I was placed immediately with the Unlov-um, on the fifth floor?”

Angiron seemed surprised by the question. “Well, I suppose you’d have to ask Sister Regalia for a full accounting on that point,” he said. “Although, that certainly sounds plausible to me.” Then he turned in his chair and opened a cabinet behind him, placing the knife inside before turning to face her once again.

“So I was speaking gibberish?”

He smiled sympathetically. “Now it hardly sounds surprising for a child as bright as you to have invented her own style of speech, does it?”

Tayna shrugged. “I suppose not.” She lifted her gaze from the floor up to the strange man behind the desk. “The language I made up. Did it even sound close to any real languages?”

Angiron sputtered and coughed for a moment. “Ah, er, ahem. I’m afraid I, uh . . . Languages are not really my area of expertise.” Suddenly, his face brightened. “Although, I do remember reading about the case at the time. There was one fellow who thought it bore a passing resemblance to the local aboriginal tongues, though I gather nothing helpful ever arose from the theory.”

Tayna perked up a bit at that. “Really? Which language?”

“All of them, my dear. The poor fellow was quite exercised about it, though I never did understand why.” He smiled benevolently.

“And no specific words were ever worked out?”

Angiron was beginning to look uncomfortable. “Just the one, if I remember correctly. Just the one.”

“And what was that?”

The tiny Lord now took his feet. “Your name, my dear. Your name. Sister Regalia had taken to calling you Mowgli, but every time she said it within your hearing, you pointed to your chest and declared with inescapable certainty, ‘Tayna.’ A most impressive display of character from one so young.”

Tayna was pleased with the sound of that. The image it formed in her mind was so . . . Tayna. But before she could frame another question, he had rounded the desk and was ushering her toward the door.

“It really has been charming to get this chance to know one another, but I must say good night now.”

Tayna looked bewildered. “But I thought you had questions for me,” she said.

“Another time, my dear. A rain check, perhaps?”

Tayna looked at him uncertainly. “I think I’d like that,” she said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

Angiron face clenched slightly into a scowl. “I’m sure I have, girl. Yes, I’m quite sure I have.”

When they opened the door to come out, Sister Regalia huffed her way past them with her nose in the air to reclaim her lair. Lord Angiron ignored her and took Tayna’s hand in his own, his demeanor suddenly smoothed again from whatever had upset him. “If you’ll excuse us dear, the Sister and I have a few matters to discuss.” Then he reached up and stroked Tayna’s cheek with oily fingertips, which caused a shudder of revulsion to run screaming up her spine, but she fought down the urge to flinch. “I’m sure we’ll see each other again very soon,” he said, “I’ll be staying for a while. The Good Sister has kindly offered me the use of the guest quarters. I look forward to our next meeting.” Tayna could swear he actually blew a silent kiss at her, and then he turned to follow Sister Regalia back into the office.

Ew, ew, ew, ew, ew! Tayna’s mind screamed in disgust, as soon as the door closed. His touch had been like oiled sandpaper and what the hell was that kissy face thing all about? She shuddered convulsively and reached up quickly to try to scrub away the memory of his caress. When that boiling pot had finally simmered down, it dawned on her that she had just had one of the most baffling nights of her entire life. Not only had she learned more about her past from some creepy dwarf in ten minutes than she’d been able to pry out of anybody else in ten years, but then there had been all of that “Yes sir, Lord Angiron, sir” business earlier with Regalia. And how do you even begin to talk about the whole “Duck Man meets Mr. Kicky Foot” thing from earlier? Yup. Altogether a *very* confusing night. She needed to let all of this soak in for a while. More importantly, she was exhausted and needed sleep. Maybe by morning she’d be ready to try to tell Shammi all about it.



Lies crept quietly out of the ground floor washroom and trotted down the hall toward the Sister Superior’s office, looking over her shoulder as she went, to see if anybody else was around. Like most of the girls who had spent any time in the Old Shoe, Lies had developed her own

way of surviving. It was all well and good for Tayna to have that whole “quiet competence” thing going on, but there was only room for one Tayna in the house. Lies had a different strategy, one that she liked to call her ‘policy of superior knowledge.’ The only problem was that acquiring useful information required taking risks. Like being caught out of bed after Failing Light. She raised her hand as though she were about to knock at the door and held it there—just in case. Then she leaned in to listen.

“- can’t risk giving them to Tayna.” An unfamiliar voice carried through the heavy wooden door.

Lies’s eyes popped. “Superior Knowledge” usually just meant bits of dirt—what Regalia thought of one of the girls, or one of the Sisters, maybe. But lately, she’d been batting high numbers, scoring all kinds of useful tidbits, and this definitely sounded useful. She still didn’t know what she’d done to upset Tayna, but maybe if she got something good now, she could use it to make peace. That would be nice. Lies looked around the hall and quickly checked the stairwell over her shoulder. Everything looked quiet, so Lies took a chance and moved in a little closer.

“How have you managed to keep the little f’znat in the dark for so long? She almost pinked me twice in less than ten minutes.” It was a man’s voice, but Lies didn’t recognize it.

“I told you it was risky.” That was Regalia. “She’s trickier than she looks. The best way to keep a secret is to forget you even know one, but in her case, she has a knack of digging them out of you anyway. I find the best policy is to go on the offensive every time she speaks.”

The man grunted.

“Did you get anything useful out of her while she was standing you on your head?”

Immediately, there was a bestial snarl, followed by the sound of something heavy smacking into something soft. Lies jerked her head back instinctively.

“Speak to me in that manner again and the next time, I’ll use the pointy end.”

“Yes, Lord Angiron. I forgot myself. Please forgive me.”

Lies was more startled by the Sister's groveling than she had been by the sounds of violence, and it suddenly dawned on her that she might be in danger herself. Something intense was going on, and if she got caught out here, chances were good that she'd learn about the pointy end too. But to her credit, Lies didn't even consider bailing. This had something to do with Tayna, and it sounded nuclear big—so big that something as trivial as Lies's own fear wasn't even going to be given a vote. Throwing caution down an elevator shaft, she pressed her ear firmly against the door.



Shortly after she fell asleep, Tayna had the dream again. Rising from the bed, she floated silently across the room with her arms stretched out to either side. Her fingertips gently brushed the walls as she drifted out into the hall. Two bare feet hung limply below the hem of her nightgown and her toes bumped idly against the hardwood floor, in time with her breathing.

As before, her eyes were closed, but she could still see herself from the hovering little bird position above and behind her body. Down, down she went, past the other floors of girls, past the Goody-Goody level and past the ground-floor offices. Lies smiled and waved from the doorway where her interview was happening. She looked so happy, but Tayna continued drifting, down the steps and into the basement. She floated calmly through the dining hall and beyond, into the kitchen. At the back wall, next to the large, walk-in freezer, she came to a small door that she only ever saw in the dream. It swung silently open before her and she swept past it into the brightly lit chamber. Her body floated around the perimeter of the room, facing the walls and even her disembodied, floating viewpoint could see nothing but the rough, brick surface that almost scraped her nose. Behind her, in the middle of the secret room, she could hear things: Lord Angiron talking in muffled tones, the drone of a television turned down low and something else that sounded like wind chimes.

As she strained to listen, she became aware of a tickle in her toes,

which quickly intensified into an almost painful burning sensation. Still floating, Tayna arched her back and kicked, trying to shake the feeling from her toes, but that only made it move, first into her feet, and then flowing up through her calves and thighs, and then on, up through her torso, chest and neck, where it divided and ran down both her arms to her fingertips, only to rebound back up her arms, where it recombined and shot straight upward into her head. When at last it faded, all that was left was a mild buzzing feeling that settled into the flesh of her ears. But still the sounds droned on.

The words made no sense and even as she strained to hear them, her body continued its tour of the musty brickwork, dragging her attention back to the scene around her. Tonight, however, when she tried to turn to look at the middle of the room, her body cooperated, turning easily and allowing her to see what had previously been hidden. A thick wire hung from the ceiling and at its end was a shimmering watery sphere. Distorted images of television programs rippled in the water and the sounds of laugh-tracks and insipid banter whispered from its depths. On the floor, below the sphere, there was a round, three-legged table. Each leg was made of a whitish, knobby wood, capped at either end with intricate skull carvings, and on the table, sat one of the Goodies' urns. Each time the voice of Lord Angiron spoke, a single drop of liquid fell from the sphere and struck the urn, causing it to reverberate with the sound of wind chimes.

As her gaze swept across it, the urn seemed to shudder in startlement, apparently surprised to see her, but Tayna only smiled. Dreams are so weird. By then, her body had completed its circuit of the room, and a wave of relaxation washed over her once more, as she drifted back toward the still-open door. She was just about to float through it when a dull throb of light pulsed from several of the bricks to one side. Tayna paused and reached out curiously with an upraised finger, probing gently at one of the bricks. As she touched it, a new voice echoed within her thoughts. "Urgent fear." The voice was warm and inviting, but it conveyed great sorrow and distress. Tayna ran her finger across the bricks, each one reverberating with gong-like word pairs in her mind. "Family yours. Peril great. Flee now. Home come." Tayna hated this kind

of dream. Every orphan had them and she was disgusted with herself. Hadn't she given them up a long time ago?

In any case, her dream body turned away from the bricks and she resumed her stately progress out the door, which closed behind her. Back across the kitchen floor she went, arms outstretched and toes bumping along the floor until Lies stepped out in front of her with arms of rope, that looped and coiled about Tayna's shoulders, bringing her to a bobbing halt.

"What have you done?" Lies screamed. Her fury took the form of ruby-red sparks, spraying from her eye sockets like venom. "Get out! Get out!" Lies's ropey arms shook Tayna in violent jerks of rage.

That was enough to wake Tayna from her dream and she tried to sit up. Lies was leaning over her. "You have to get out!" she hissed. Tayna blinked uncertainly at her friend, who looked like she had been crying. Or was about to. Lies shook Tayna's shoulders again, vigorously, unaware that it was no longer necessary.

"I'm awake," Tayna mumbled, as she looked around, trying to make sense of her bed. Then she gasped. She wasn't in her bed at all. She wasn't even in the dorm.

She was standing with her arms stretched wide beside her, in the center of the kitchen floor.

chapter 4

Tayna shuddered. “Wha? This can’t be . . .” She swiveled her head around slowly, as though she were still caught in the dream. The brick wall in the kitchen behind her was blank. No little doors of any kind. Beside her, Lies could only gape, wondering what Tayna was looking at.

“Come on, Captain Space-for-Rent. Mission Control needs you back in your body. We’ve got to get you out of here! Pronto!”

Tayna turned toward the voice. “Lies? What happened to your rope-arms?”

Eliza wasn’t sure what to do. Usually, it was Tayna who provided all the grim determination, but with her still offline . . . Eliza grabbed herself mentally by the throat and forced her panic down into a burning ember in her right sock. Deal with it later. This was not the time to take a basket-case moment. There was too much at stake. She grabbed Tayna roughly by the arm and dragged her over to the bottom of the stairwell. For the moment, everything was silent. The gloom of the darkened stairway was punctuated only twice, where light spilled onto the landings from the first and second floor hallways above. Otherwise, the stairs were empty, but there was no telling how long that would last.

Lies grabbed at Tayna’s hand and pressed it against the wooden step. “Feel that. Stairs, right? Not dorm room. Basement. Got it?”

Tayna nodded slowly. “I guess . . .” The solid feel of wood under her hand gave her something to focus on. She ran her thumb along the worn edge of the step. Then she looked at her bare feet and a smile gradually bloomed. “You’re right,” she said. “It can’t be a dream.” She looked at Lies and began marching in place, lifting and lowering each foot alternately with large, exaggerated steps. “Dream-feet never touch the floor.”

Lies blew out a sigh of relief. “Thank God. I thought you’d never wake up.” Tayna started to say something but Lies interrupted. “Ear practice, T, not mouth practice.” The expression was one they’d both heard Sister Anthrax use a million times in class. Tayna pulled a face at her, but she didn’t interrupt.

“Sister Regalia just went upstairs looking for you. Any minute she’s going to find you out of bed and they’re going to start searching. We cannot let her find you.”

Tayna screwed up her face. “So? I’m out of bed after Failing Light. It’s hardly the worst . . .” Lies shook her head.

“The problem’s not her, it’s him.”

“Who?”

“Lord Angry One, or something like that. I heard them talking in her office. You have *got* to stay away from him.”

“Lord Angiron? I met him earlier. There’s something seriously bent about him, but . . .” She shuddered at the memory of his touch.

Lies waved her hands in a that-doesn’t-matter motion. “It doesn’t matter what you thought about him then. That was before bed, right?” Tayna nodded. “Well, everything changed a few minutes ago when he made his decision.”

“What decision?”

Lies stamped a foot in frustration. This was taking too long! Upstairs, they could now hear voices. Time was running out. She drew a deep breath. “Look T, I heard a bunch of stuff when I was up there, and there’s a lot we need to talk about, but there were two things that really scared me, okay?” Tayna had never heard her friend actually frightened like this before. She nodded but didn’t interrupt.

“The first thing I heard was Lord What’s-his-name beating Sister

Regalia. A real punch-her-in-the-eye-and-bounce-her-off-the-furniture kind of beating. And that was just for smart-mouthing him.” Tayna’s eyes went wide. She remembered how easily Lord Angiron had ordered the Sister around and how quick the woman had been to obey. That behavior suddenly made sense.

“And the other thing?”

Lies looked Tayna straight in the eye and lowered her voice. “He said he was going to kill you. Tonight. “Take you out of this world with one quick swing of his staff.””

The blood drained from Tayna’s face. For the briefest moment, she wondered if maybe this was just another of Lies’s secret fantasy games, but one look at her friend’s eyes laid that idea to rest. Eliza Drummel wasn’t that good an actress. If she was saying that the sky was falling, then, judging by her face, she must have already been hit by a couple of chunks.

“Okay. What’s the plan?” The two girls had pulled hundreds of pranks and schemes in their years together. Missions. They were used to sketching things out for each other quickly and quietly.

Lies shrugged. “We’ve got three gargoyles: Lord Angry Guy and Regalia on five, with Diaphana last seen checking the babies on three. I’m thinking Operation Lookyhere. Should give you plenty of time to make the front door.”

Tayna considered for a moment and then nodded. “Sounds good, but after you set the shrill, take off for bed, okay? No point in both of us getting caught. I’ll take it from there.”

“You sure?”

Tayna nodded. “Yup. Positive.” Well, maybe not *positive*. The two girls looked at one another. They both had the sense that this was good-bye.

“Listen, T. About earlier . . .”

Tayna shook her head. “Bridge-water, amiga. Into storage until we have time to giggle over it. Deal?”

Lies nodded, her eyes brimming, then she lunged forward and trapped her best friend in the world with an enormous bear hug. “Watch your back, T.”

“You too.”

After a moment, Tayna pulled herself out of the embrace and saluted Lies with a goofy flip of her hand, then she darted up the stairs without looking back. Behind her, Lies sniffed once and then turned and bolted for the kitchen. Now would be a great time for some tea.



Tayna stopped on the second-last step, just below the first-floor landing. It was decision time. She peered cautiously around the wall into the hallway. Everything looked clear. The light was on in Regalia's office and its door was partly open, but she couldn't see if anyone was in there. Her gaze slid longingly toward the front door, just a few steps further down the hall. Lies had made it sound so easy, but Tayna knew better. There were many things Sister Diaphana might be talked into doing, but letting Tayna out the front door into the dark of night was not one of them. The front door was not an option until they *knew* where Diaphana was. If she was on night-duty, she'd be sitting at Regalia's desk, right now, and that made the chances of getting caught while she was unlocking the front door pretty high. Even if she *did* manage to get through it, she still had no way to lock the door behind her, from the outside. Somebody was sure to notice and come after her, and her experiences from earlier that afternoon had proven that she was going to need as big a head start as she could get.

No, the front door was a no-go. What she really wanted was in the office. Regalia's window was the only ground-floor window that wasn't either barred on the outside or painted shut on the inside. Hopefully, all three gargoyles would be drawn to the basement in response to Lies's distraction, and that would leave Tayna's way clear to get out the window and close it behind her. *Then* she might have a reasonable chance at a head start.

Besides, she thought, as she turned and looked up the next flight of stairs. This is *my* turf. Nobody chases me out of here until I'm good and ready to go. And that isn't going to happen until I've got my journal.

Tayna stalked quietly across the landing and began to climb once

more. A new plan had already formed. She still had time to get up to the roof door, above the fifth floor, before Eliza's distraction summoned Regalia downstairs. Once the old bat had left, Tayna would be able to drop down and get her stuff. Then she'd make her way back down and out through the office window while everyone was running around trying to find her. She trotted down the second-floor hallway toward the base of the next flight of stairs, smiling at her own craftiness, when she heard the unmistakable sound of descending feet from above. Adult feet. They were coming down too soon!

"She's not in her dorm," said a muffled voice from the stairwell. Tayna slowed down to listen. It was Regalia.

"She's not on the fourth floor either." Lord Angiron's tone was no longer as ingratiating as she remembered it.

"Skip two and three for now," Regalia said as their voices got louder. "We can check those later. First we have to keep her from reaching the ground floor and the exits."

Dammit! Tayna looked quickly back in the direction she'd come from, wondering if she should double back, but until she knew where Diaphana was, that was a no-go. The large Sister would never intentionally hurt her, but she had a way of trapping everyone around her in the slow, sticky tar of her own confusion, and tonight that amounted to the same thing.

"You do that," came Angiron's reply. "I want to check the basement. Then we can take our time working up from there more thoroughly. She'll have nowhere else to go."

Oh no. If he goes down into the basement now, he's going to catch Lies! Tayna took a step, reversing herself, back toward Lies, but she stopped. Lies would just have to watch out for herself. Then she went the other way, returning to her original plan, toward the next flight of stairs. But she halted on that path, too. Angiron and Regalia were about to come down those very stairs! She looked around quickly. Second floor—nun territory. Great. There was a Goody behind every door, leaving nowhere to hide. Then her eyes fell upon the door at the end of the hall. Well, sure. *That* room was empty, but that would just be stupid. Wouldn't it?

The heavy footfalls booming from the stairwell were getting impossibly loud. There was no time! Tayna sucked in her breath. I am *so* going to regret this! Then she turned, and with the imagined shadow of Regalia looming over her every step, she ran down the hall for all she was worth. It was impossible to tell which sound was loudest: the thumping of her bare feet on the worn hardwood floor, the thunder of her heart that seemed on the verge of blowing her ribs out through the sides of her chest, or the cannonade of Regalia and Angiron's feet hurtling down the stairs behind her in their louder-than-life, Tayna-killing frenzy.

Fortunately, the cannonade must have been the loudest, because neither Angiron nor Regalia appeared to have heard either of the other sounds. They turned the corner at the bottom of the stairwell just as Tayna leaped through the bedroom door and pulled it shut behind her. Safe!

If you could call Regalia's bedroom safe.



With her task in the basement complete, Lies was now paused at the main floor landing. She quickly saw the problem posed by Regalia's half-open office door, and the front door was still locked, so Tayna hadn't gotten out that way, either. She must still be somewhere in the building, then. Eliza was just beginning to wonder what she could do to help when she too heard the din of adult feet on the stairs above. Oh crap! Were they chasing T? She listened carefully. No, worse! Something about searching the ground floor! Suddenly, Lies could feel the walls closing in. In a few seconds, she was going to be locked in a game of cat and mouse with an enraged Goody and her best friend, Mr. Impulse Control Issues.

That got her moving. Without another thought, Lies crossed the hall and started checking the handles of the closed doors. The magic of her afternoon with the Nackenfausches must still have been with her, though, because when she tried the interview room door, it swung open silently in her hand. Nobody had locked it! Thank you! She slipped inside the room where only hours ago, she had had the most

exciting conversation of her life, and closed the door gently behind her. Then she took a deep breath. This was about to get very interesting. In front of her, the door that connected this room to Regalia's office was open slightly. Eliza trotted quietly across the carpeted floor and closed it, then she held onto the knob with both hands and waited.

It seemed like only moments later that the pounding feet on the stairs reached its crescendo. One set of feet seemed to continue down into the basement, but whose? Her attention was quickly drawn back to the other set of feet, as they crossed the hallway and entered Regalia's office.

"Where are you, girl?" Lies breathed a small sigh of relief. It was Regalia. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" She listened as the old crone pushed her desk chair out of the way, presumably to look under the desk itself. She was standing right on the other side of this door! Lies tightened her grip on the handle and hung on for dear life. A moment later, she had to stifle a shriek as the handle jerked in her hands, but she didn't let go.

"God damn all sticky doors and troublesome girls!" Lies could hear the swirl of fabric as Regalia whirled around and stormed out of her office, punctuated by a sharp *clack!* as she locked her office door behind her. Eliza swallowed once, terrified of what she was doing, and then she pulled the inter-office door open, stepped through it and pulled it shut again behind her, just as Regalia entered the interview room through the outer door. Again Eliza held tight to the doorknob. From within the room she had just vacated, she could hear raspy breathing as the Sister Superior searched. And once again, her heart leapt all the way up to bounce off her tonsils when the doorknob shook in her hands.

"Why doesn't anything work properly around here?" Regalia raged, but the nun didn't take the time to investigate, and a moment later, she was gone again. Eliza let out a long, slow breath of air when she heard the outer door of the interview room being locked. Only then did she finally relax her grip. It would take at least fifteen minutes for Regalia to check all the rooms on this floor and to lock them all—especially if she wanted to be thorough.

Just then, a shrill whistle pierced the night, and nearly startled her out of her skin. But then she smiled. In all the excitement, she'd almost forgotten. One made-to-measure distraction, coming up! Any second now, Regalia would go tearing off toward the basement and-

But as suddenly as it had started, the whistle died. Eliza rolled her eyes. Those damned gremlins! She should have known better! They were always getting into things and ruining her plans. Like the time she had left the water bomb above Sister Anthrax's bedroom door but it had burst when nobody was around? Gremlins. And the time she'd set her alarm to get up at five o'clock in the morning to catch Sister Disgustia putting dead cats in the stew pot, only it had gone off at five in the afternoon instead? Gremlins. And now they'd pulled her distraction kettle off the stove before it had finished doing its job, too. Not fair! This time it was important! She stamped a foot in frustration, and then immediately recoiled in horror. Had anybody heard that?

Eliza strained to listen. Was Regalia about to come running back in to investigate? Or maybe she had actually heard the kettle before the gremlins had silenced it. Maybe nothing was ruined at all and Regalia was about to go racing to the basement despite their meddling. She stretched her ears as far into the silence as she could. There was only the ticking of a clock. And then, from another room, she heard a closet door close and Regalia's muttering and sputtering. But there was no sound of raging nun, no whisper of habit cloth as the Sister Superior stormed down the hallway. The gremlins had done their job after all, and now Tayna was out there somewhere, hiding from a killer and waiting for a diversion that would never come.

Eliza's shoulders sagged. Why did anybody trust her to do anything important? She went to the window and leaned against the coat rack, burying her face in the folds of Regalia's old habit. She should have followed her usual Pylon Law: *When you get confused, just stand still. When you're in danger or you don't know what's going on, pretend to be a deaf mute and wait. Sooner or later, the situation will reveal itself and tell you everything you need to know, so long as everyone thinks you're an idiot.* But she couldn't do that tonight, could she. It's fine to play dumb when you're the only one in danger, but not when your best

friend was about to be murdered. That was the time for some serious non-pylonry. Eliza wiped her eyes on the habit sleeve and then peered through its folds to the street beyond. There was Anger-man's limo, parked at the curb. And to the right, the dull gray concrete of the front steps glowed with reflected moonlight. Freedom was so close! But she was now further than ever from getting Tayna out that door—out onto the street and safely away from all this insanity. She let the nun's habit settle back into place and turned away from the window, disgusted. With herself, mostly. She'd botched the relatively simple job of creating a diversion. How on Earth was she supposed to create one now, from here? She might just as well pick up the phone and dial 1-800-MIRACLE for all the good that would—

Eliza paused, and the forlorn expression that had been melting her features relaxed. She looked back at the window and the coat rack, and then a mischievous grin germinated at the corners of her mouth. A glimmer of hope. Maybe there was a way after all. Before she could risk killing the plan by over-thinking it, Lies turned around and grabbed the telephone from the desk.

It was definitely worth a shot.



If there was any room in the entire building that was sacred, it wouldn't be the tiny chapel on the ground floor. That oversized closet had been stuffed with boxes of paper and old office equipment for years now. No, for sacred—as in, the room treated with the greatest of awe and respect—you'd have to look somewhere else: Regalia's bedroom. In her ten years of residence, Tayna had been in absolutely every single room of the building, save this one. The urge to somehow mark the personal triumph of finally breaching the sanctum was powerful, but Tayna was not Eliza. She knew better than to let her fanciful imagination take control. Tonight, this room was nothing more than temporary shelter. Her eyes were darting around the room, flicking from oddity to oddity in the Sister Superior's choice of decor when a sound froze her blood in her veins.

A knock at the door.

Regalia had found her! But then she paused and cocked her head. Regalia? Knocking at her own door? Who could it be? Panic grabbed Tayna by the shoulders. Now what? What should she do? Throwing caution to the wind, Tayna steeled her nerves and grunted an answer.

“Unh?” She made her voice as gravelly and raspy as she could and hoped for the best.

“It’s just me, Sister. I heard you come in and I just wanted to thank you, dear. For letting me stay for another night, and to work with these wonderful children for another day.” Diaphana.

Tayna tried to imagine how Regalia would react to such undiluted sweetness. “Hngh!” Then she reached out with a trembling hand and locked the door. Loudly.

There was a silent pause, and then Diaphana replied quietly. “Yes. Of course, dear. You’re tired. I understand. Well, good night then. And thank you.” Again there was a pause, and through it all, Tayna’s heart was breaking, but what else could she do? She couldn’t let the warm-hearted Sister find her—certainly not here, of all places. And she was pretty sure that, had she really been here, Regalia’s patience would have worn out by now, so she remained completely silent. After another moment, Tayna heard the large Sister sigh and then shuffle away down the hall, until at last she heard a bedroom door open and then close.

Whew. That was close. Well, at least now she knew what had happened to Diaphana. She must have come up to bed shortly after Lies had seen her. Then Tayna kicked herself in the shin, because that meant that Regalia’s office had been empty all along. She could have just sauntered in there and climbed out through the window any time she’d wanted! Damn! Oh well. It might have been empty earlier, but it certainly wouldn’t be now. This great plan was going off the rails in a godawful hurry. The situation just kept changing. Her mission to the fifth floor was going to have to wait now, too. What Tayna needed most right now was somewhere to catch her breath and to think. Somewhere safer than the heart of Goody Country. She couldn’t go down, that much was clear. With two gargoyles below her, any front-door strategy was now hopeless. Where was Lies’s distraction? Operation Looky-

here was pretty reliable, but it actually needed the “looky here” part to work. Something must have gone wrong. The best thing to do now would be to find somewhere to sit and wait—give Lies time to work out a Plan B. And the only place that was unlikely to be searched any time soon was up even higher—the roof. It wasn’t perfect and it wouldn’t last forever, but it would be safe enough for a while. Maybe an hour if she was lucky. Hopefully Lies would have something by then.

Tayna unlocked the door as quietly as she could and slipped out into the darkness. Fortunately, her lifetime of sneaking around the building after Failing Light had taught her about all the trick steps and unexpected squeaks in the floor, and she made it to the roof in relative silence. The stairwell door let out at the back of the roof, where the rusty iron ladder of the fire escape arched up over the chest-high perimeter wall before disappearing down into the gloom on the other side, but Tayna only glanced at it and shuddered.

No. What she needed now was information, so she headed instead for the flag pole at the front of the building, skirting past the ominous dark rectangle of the swimming pool garden on her left. A moment later she looked down onto the streetscape below. There was Angiron’s car, sitting nonchalantly at the curb, waiting to drag her away to some unimaginably creepy fate. And across the street from that was the alley—to the best of her knowledge, the home and castle of a completely different homicidal maniac—one who wore rubber pants and who had apparently chosen Tayna as his next chew toy. So many choices lay before her. Death by creepy short guy, or death by creepy tall guy. The world was nothing if not generous. If Lies didn’t come through soon, Tayna would be left with no choice but to risk the Clattering Cage of Flaming Death.

The long-condemned fire escape.

Tayna had been on it a few times before, just the top couple of rungs, to prove she wasn’t scared of it. But she was. Its dull orange rungs were thick with flaking rust. Some were so corroded that by day she could actually see through them in places, and two of them were actually missing. Nobody knew when anyone had last actually tested the thing, and the general belief was that, if there ever was a fire, attempting to use it would only ensure that your charred remains would fit into an

even smaller box, because there wouldn't be any long bones left unbroken after you had plummeted to the alley below.

Still, if it became necessary, Tayna would rather die trying to escape than to just surrender. Would she be able to find the rungs in the dark? Would they hold her weight? Would they be slippery with condensation in the cold night air? And what about the noise? Even the best fire escapes were designed to get people to the ground during a crazy emergency—not to be silent highways for burglars and runaways. And this one was far from one of the best. Every bolt and bar shook and rattled whenever you touched the stupid thing, making it bang and clang like a blacksmith's shop in a drainage culvert. All in all, her chances of reaching the street without being heard were probably better if she just jumped. She shivered at the thought. Hopefully, she wouldn't ever have to make that decision. Lies would come through. The girl might be wacky, but she was a reliable kind of wacky.

Tayna hunkered down out of the wind, with her back to the kneewall and was just beginning to settle when she heard a car horn. Terror flooded through her. Had somebody seen her up here on the roof? Was Angiron honking his horn to alert Regalia to what he'd just seen? Well, if that was the case, it couldn't hurt to look again. Slowly, she turned around and leaned her head out over the wall and peeked down. What she saw baffled her completely. A taxi. There was a yellow taxi sitting at the curb, idling, in front of Angiron's car. He appeared to be waiting for a passenger, but who would-?

Again the horn blared, a little more stridently this time. And then, as Tayna watched in mystified disbelief, Sister Regalia scuttled out the front door and over to the waiting taxi. For some reason, the bizarre old hag was abandoning the hunt, and leaving. Had Angiron beaten her with his stick again? As soon as the passenger door closed, the taxi pulled smartly away from the curb and headed off into the night. Tayna slumped to the ground, completely befuddled. It was getting so that you needed some kind of computery wiring-type diagram just to keep track of who was trying to kill who around here. Then, before she could even get a handle on these latest developments, more commotion sounded from the street below.

Tayna raised herself up over the wall again and looked. There was Sister Regalia, miraculously back on the sidewalk, and pointing down the street at the disappearing taxi she had only just moments ago fled in. She turned and yelled something up the stairs toward the open front doors. In a flash, Angiron was out onto the sidewalk, pulling her toward his car. Regalia made a move to jerk away, but Angiron cuffed her brutally with the back of his hand and flung her into the car. Then he ran around to the driver's side, jumped in and gunned the engine, giving chase to the taxi that had by now vanished from sight.

Up on the roof, Tayna slumped back down again, trying to figure out what had just happened. How could her luck get this good, so quickly? She simply couldn't believe it. Again she stuck her head out over the edge, to confirm what her brain was having trouble accepting. And again she saw that Angiron's car was gone, the front door was open and both Regalias had left the building, along with the vicious Lord Angiron.

Tayna allowed herself five full seconds of additional incredulity and then she pulled herself to her feet. "Not much of an escape if I stay here," she said, and then she ran back to the stairwell door and plunged inside.



It took her exactly one hundred and eighteen seconds to detour from the stairwell to her room and collect the few things she owned that were worth taking with her. Her journal and the few bits of clothing that didn't absolutely shout "homeless orphan." She dumped it all into her ratty old knapsack and paused briefly to salute her sleeping ward-mates before racing back out into the hall.

When she reached the ground floor, she slowed down. Sure enough, the front door was still open, but she just couldn't shake the feeling that this was some elaborate trap. Tayna edged her way cautiously down the hall to the point where she could look out without being seen from the street. Yup. The car was still gone. She was almost ready to run out the door and escape to her freedom when lights appeared on the pavement. A car was coming.

O crap, o crap, o crap, o crap! I waited too long! Now Angiron's back and he's going to find me and I'm going to be dragged off to some swamp and murdered. Tayna crouched down at the edge of the door, too terrified to look out and equally terrified not to. But finally she did, only what she saw still didn't make any sense. Now the taxi was back and Regalia was getting out. Before Tayna could tear her eyes from the scene to run, something about Regalia caught her attention. She wasn't as ugly as she ought to be. And then, in another moment, realization flooded through her.



Eliza closed the taxi door behind her, being careful to pull the hem of the habit out of the way first. The damn fabric is everywhere! Then she looked up and saw the wide-open door of the Old Shoe. This was it. The moment of truth. It was obvious that the limo was gone—Angiron had taken the bait—but had Regalia gone with him? Eliza took a deep breath and did the bravest thing she had ever done. She walked up the steps and in the front door. And then something grabbed her hard around the shoulders.

“Oh my God, Lies! Thank you! That was the coolest, smartest most bad-assedest thing I've ever seen!”

Relief flooded through Eliza's still-terrified body and she sagged against Tayna's enthusiastic hug. “Thank God, T. You still haven't been hacked to bits. Did Regalia go with him?”

Tayna pulled away and looked at her. “You think I'd be standing here like this if she hadn't?” Then she smiled. “How on Earth did you come up with that stunt?”

Eliza blushed. She was unaccustomed to being the center of such approving attention. “Well, it just sort of came to me while I was hiding in Regalia's office,” she said.

“You hid in her office?” Tayna looked shocked. “And she didn't find you?”

Lies smiled slyly. “I kinda faked her out with the ‘sticky door-knob’ trick.” Tayna's jaw dropped.

“Girl, you must have enormous brass chaninkas where your brain used to be. That is so freaking awesome!”

Eliza loved the feeling of being appreciated, but even more, she wanted her friend to be safe, and at the moment, she still wasn't. “Look, T,” she said, “I would love to take time to catch up—you know we've got a lot to talk about now—but you have got to go. I told the taxi driver to wait for me—I told him I'd forgotten something and that I'd be right back out.” As she talked, she pulled the bulky habit over her head and then handed it to Tayna.

“Just pull this on and he'll never notice the swap. I think all nuns look the same to most people.”

Tayna grabbed the robes and pulled her head and arms through the appropriate holes. “How am I supposed to pay him, Lies? I don't have any money.”

Eliza smirked at her. “Would I go and set you up with a great exit like this, and then forget something as basic as that? I called the taxi service using the Goody's account. You know, the one they use to send you out collecting and when Sister Disgustia goes to the supermarket?”

Tayna just shook her head in disbelief. “Eliza Drummel, you're my hero.”

Eliza bowed deeply. “And you've always been mine, T, so we're even. Now scoot! Before somebody comes back and ruins this little love-fest.”

Tayna picked up her knapsack, then she turned and gave Eliza a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you so much, Lies. I owe you. Big time.” Then she turned and darted out to the car.

Eliza watched until the taxi pulled away, then she closed and locked the big front door and went up to bed. It occurred to her that throughout this entire escapade, not a single grown-up had laid eyes on her, so she was feeling very good about herself as she climbed the stairs and headed toward a well deserved night's sleep.

chapter 5

Sitting in the back of the taxi, Tayna realized that she had no idea what to do next. She'd spent all her time worrying about getting out of the building, and none of it planning what would happen next. Now that she was out, the tension that had been building between her shoulders and in the pit of her stomach was beginning to melt away, leaving nothing to hold her together but the shakes. She had just fled the only home she had ever known, in fear for her life. Worse, the only adults she had ever met who weren't Goodies themselves, either worked for them, or were little more than cardboard cutout strangers. There wasn't a soul in the world she could actually run to. She looked up and the driver's eyes meet hers in the rear view mirror.

"Where to now, Sister?"

Good. He hadn't noticed the switch, but she still had no idea where to go. She lowered her eyes and said the first thing that came to mind. "The Wasketawin Center, please." Then she pulled her veil down a little lower. Wasketawin? It took her a moment to recall why that destination came so readily to mind. Oh. Right. That's where Angiron said they found me. Obviously there wouldn't be any clues still lying around—not after ten years—but it gave her somewhere to go. And at the very least, the trip would give her some time to think.

Tayna's biggest worry now was the driver. What if he wanted to talk? What if he was the kind of guy who did this job because he liked people. She couldn't afford to get dragged into a conversation. If that happened, he would soon figure out how young she was and might even try to take her back to the Old Shoe. Rather than wait to see what he would do, she decided to head him off. As soon as they were under way, Tayna raised her hands up, clasped them together in front of her face, and started murmuring under her breath. There were two things that gave most people the willies: public displays of religious fervor, and a habit of talking to imaginary friends. (Or were those maybe the same thing?) At any rate, she didn't much care whether he thought she was praying strenuously or having a serious argument with the man who lived inside her fingers—so long as he left her alone, and he did. She felt a little guilty about being so rude, but then again, he was probably used to it—especially if he'd ever had Goodies as fares before.

The next problem on the horizon was how to handle getting rid of him when they reached the park, but it turned out to be the easiest thing in the world. Fortunately, thanks to Eliza's quick thinking, there was no need to pay the man. When the car slowed down at the entrance to the park, Tayna told him to pull over. And when he did, she just got out and said goodnight. If he wondered what a young Sister of Good Salvation was planning to do on the side of a desolate highway in the middle of the night, he never mentioned it. He just turned the car around and drove away. Tayna waited until his tail-lights were a dim glow in the distance before she felt safe enough to look around. Angiron had said something about her having been found out this way, not in the park, but near it, on the highway. And that meant somewhere around here. Maybe something would look familiar.

This far from the city, the sky was a brilliant wash of stars. Reflections off the thin skiff of snow gave her enough light to see by, not that there was much to see. She was standing at the edge of a two-lane highway. In front of her, a few shrubs and low trees flanked the large, stone sign that marked the entrance to the park. From there, the entrance lane ran back toward the interpretive center, hugging close to the lip of the coulee all the way. And that was it. There was nothing else. Just flat,

wind-scoured prairie spilling to the horizon in every direction. Seeing it now, on a cold and windy winter night, Tayna found it easy to understand why native clans had sought shelter here for so many thousands of years. Not in the interpretive center, of course—that was new—but down in the fold of land beside it. Some dim, distant taste of memory teased at her. There was something familiar feeling here, but as soon as she tried to examine it, it melted away like a hoar frost in the sun. And all the while, that feeling was serenaded by four disjoint phrases, teasing at her from the depths of her unconscious.

Family yours. Peril great. Flee now. Home come.

Could that have been something more than just a stupid orphan's dream? Tayna shrugged. If there was something familiar here, she'd better get in gear and find it. Ignoring the lane, Tayna turned to her left, hefted her knapsack higher up onto her shoulder and set off, following her instincts across the crunchy, snow-packed grass down into the ancient, wooded ravine.



A coulee is a narrow, steep-sided valley that forms on the prairies. Elsewhere, people have other names for similar things, such as “ravine” or even “canyon,” but around here, they were coulees. They occurred when run-off from heavy rains dug deep scars into the earth as the water collected and then rushed away to some nearby lake or river. This particular coulee was a deep one and rather long, with a good-sized brook flowing down the middle throughout most of the year. That's part of what had made it so attractive to the plains people. Most coulees make good short-term shelter, but this one was excellent and could be used all winter long. It was deep enough to protect larger trees and game, and large enough to offer all the amenities a nomadic family could want from first snow to last. Some local scientists even believed that this location provided the oldest known evidence of humans in North America, but that belief didn't fit with the popular theories of

the day, so the claims were dismissed as just being silly, or worse, as bad science.

At first, Tayna had trouble seeing the steeply sloped ravine walls as anything but a pain. Picking her way down through all the shrubs and bushes on the sloping terrain was slow going, especially because the nun-wear kept getting snagged on the bare twigs and branches. Before long, she was sweating quite heavily under the voluminous robes, despite the cold, November night air. Eventually, though, she managed to get herself down to the flatter ground at the bottom, where she found a well worn trail. In older days, it might have been a game trail, worn by timid woodland creatures seeking refuge from the howling winter above, but these days, it was almost certainly a groomed trail, beaten flat by park staff and the few tourists who still wandered around the site during the snowier parts of the year. Regardless of which particular species of timid creature had broken the trail for her, Tayna was glad of it and followed it off to her right, deeper into the coulee and the park.

She walked for what felt like a half hour, keeping to the trail, even when it wound left and right, crossing the brook several times over low, wooden bridges, until she arrived at a crossroad. Straight ahead, the trail continued along as it had been doing, following the brook in a meandering sort of way, and to her right, a paved path branched away to run up between the shrubs until it vanished over the coulee's lip, which seemed to be much higher above her here than it had been where she'd started. This was probably the path up to the interpretive center. She was still contemplating her options when she heard voices, ahead of her on the trail. This would be a bad time to be caught snooping around the grounds, so Tayna took a few steps back up the trail and then ducked off into the brush. She hunkered herself down beneath the upturned root ball of a recently toppled tree—probably brought down under the mountain-load of snow that blew across the prairies and drifted into places like this—and there she waited. The voices were getting closer.

“Do you really think she’s coming here?” The voice was all too familiar.

“Of course she’s coming here, you dim-eyed cow! I’ve just told her the only thing she’s ever heard about the night she was found—that it is somehow connected to this place—and you think she might have

decided to go shopping? Don't be an idiot. She'll come. And she's a bright girl, too. When she does come, she just might find it. And if she figures out how to use it, this whole thing will have been in vain." That voice, ringing with disdain and self-confidence, was unmistakable. Angiron. Tayna's heart raced and she gave her non-bracelet a violent twist for good measure. How many different gods have to be angry at you to pull down this kind of bad luck? She looked around to check her hiding place. Obviously, the tree had collapsed very recently. The root ball was still dark with freshly upturned dirt, although it was thoroughly frozen. The dark cloth of the habit would be almost invisible against it. Still, she couldn't escape the sudden feeling that she was completely exposed.

"Do you suppose she might have doubled back, slumlord?" Regalia's voice was almost simpering. "I mean, if she noticed us following . . ."

"Corpses!" Angiron cursed as the two of them came into view around a bend in the main path. He swung his walking stick angrily at a young sapling, which snapped cleanly in two, as though it had been felled with an axe. "Yes, she might have done just that. Might be too frightened to think it through yet. Yes. It's more than possible that she went back, or that she soon will."

Angiron turned and grabbed Regalia by the throat. "I'm going to take you back to your precious Home now. If she does come back, you'd better be able to handle her this time." Then he looked back the way they had come. "But in case she does find her way here while I'm gone, I want to be sure she waits for me." Angiron snarled and flung the frightened nun away from him, toward the uphill path. "You drag your miserable carcass back up to the car and wait for me there. I'll be along in a minute." As he stalked off down the trail, Tayna could hear him making a strange, gurgling noise. It sounded like laughter.

Tayna could almost feel sorry for Regalia, as the usually domineering woman, now under the impression that she was completely alone, made no effort to hide her weakness, and limped slowly up to the top of the slope and out of sight. No more than ten minutes had gone by when Angiron appeared again on the path, and turned uphill at the fork, following Regalia to the parking lot. Tayna held her breath as Angiron

strode right past her hiding spot. He had his hands jammed deeply into his pockets for warmth, but he didn't even glance her way as he passed. Tayna shuddered. He had passed closely enough that she could even smell his cologne lingering in the air. It smelled like blood and wet fur. Charming.

She waited several minutes to be sure he wasn't coming back, then she stepped cautiously back out onto the path. There was something down there that Angiron didn't want her to see, and that alone would have been sufficient reason to go find it, but there was more to it than just that. This was somehow connected to her own past! Without so much as a second thought, Tayna tugged the habit's veil down firmly around her face for warmth, and set off down the snowy game trail.

The further she pushed into the coulee, the deeper and more protected it became, and the deeper the snow got. She also saw more signs of life and diversity. Dozens of different tree and shrub species huddled together, both cooperating and competing with their neighbors for survival. Beneath their roots and branches, everything from chipmunks and prairie dogs all the way up to foxes and coyotes fought for territory, food and shelter. Even a herd of mule deer browsed the barren pickings down in this natural menagerie. Tayna didn't see all these creatures, of course, but she knew they were there just the same. Here and there, tracks criss-crossed the blanket of snow, darting back and forth across the path and through the underbrush. And even if she hadn't seen the signs, Tayna felt as though she could actually sense their presence. She could almost feel the hum of their tiny heartbeats vibrating in the air.

What interested her most, however, were the big, clumsy gouges left by the most recent animal to pass. Angiron's tracks were a chaotic contrast to the almost polite perforations of the other wildlife tracks in the smooth blanket of snow. His trail ducked beneath a low-hanging branch, and, following it, Tayna ducked down low to scoot beneath it. Just then, rough hands seized her from behind and a dark sack settled down over her head.

"This trail ends *here* for you!" The voice was deep and familiar.

Tayna stamped a foot in furious frustration. "Gimme a freaking

break! Is there, like, an uber-villain bush-party going on down here and everyone just forgot to invite the victim?”

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Tayna had been surprised in the woods by Duck Man, only this time, she was completely helpless to do anything about it.



His hands spun her about quickly as they bound her arms to her sides with cord. Once she was securely pinned, he fumbled at the folds of her habit that he had pulled up over her head. It wasn't a sack after all. There was a moment of awkward tugging and then cool fresh air washed over her face.

“Are you harmed?”

The ropes were tight and she turned her head to glare at him, but when her eyes finally found his, instead of malice or psychosis, she was surprised to see what looked like genuine concern on his face. She shook off the feeling. He's not worried about me—probably just worried that my meat is bruised or whatever it is psycho killers worry about after trussing up their victims. She forced her stare away from his eyes, and allowed it to settle on his beard and mouth instead.

Duck Man repeated his question. “Have I harmed you?”

Wait a tick. Something looked wrong. What did he just say?

“Has your hearing been damaged? I was as gentle as I could be, but you had to be stopped. Have I hurt you?”

Now that she was watching his mouth as he spoke, she was certain of it. He wasn't speaking English at all. She could see his lips moving as he spoke, but they seemed . . . wrong—like she was watching an Asian film dubbed into English by deaf Swedish mimes. Nothing fit, nothing made any familiar sense, but she understood him just the same. It was the creepiest thing she'd ever felt.

“Please answer me. Are you hurt?” Duck Man was beginning to sound a bit panicked, but how could she answer? It was one thing to *understand* the sounds he was making, but could she actually speak it? Had she said anything to him in the parkette the other day? She

didn't remember. So, there was only one way to find out. Tayna cleared her throat.

"Do us think tomorrow or lifetime?" she said, hesitantly.

Duck Man's face visibly relaxed when she finally broke her silence, but then what she'd said registered and a look of puzzlement clouded his eyes for a moment. A moment later, his face lit up with understanding, and before Tayna could react, he raised a hand and set it on her head as he hummed a strange melody.

The humming stopped. "I have helped your tongue to see its error," he said. "Try again. Have I harmed you?"

Tayna looked at him suspiciously, but she repeated her answer. "Do you mean now, or ever?" After saying them, Tayna repeated the words to herself, concentrating on the movement of her tongue within her mouth. She *had* been doing it incorrectly—pushing it too far forward. She couldn't imagine what his little song might have done about it, but for whatever reason, the words were now coming out clearly.

"I had meant 'on this night,'" he said. "But if I have done you harm in any other time or manner, speak of that as well."

Tayna glared at him with all the contempt she could muster. "You mean physical harm?" she said. "Sorry to disappoint you, but nothing's broken—no thanks to you. But if you want to talk about emotional scarring, then yes—miles of damage. All these attacks in the bushes will probably keep me from ever having a good relationship with my gardener and I doubt I'll ever be able to enjoy quiet walks in the moonlight again. Does that count?"

Duck Man chuckled dryly. "I fear I have made a dreadful mistake," he said. "By correcting your speech, it seems I have handed you a powerful weapon. It is a decision that I may long regret." Then he leaned in closer. "Tell me, what is a 'gardener'?"

Tayna tried to keep her mad on, but this guy was just too whacked. Instead of leaping about and screaming, or brandishing chain-saws and toe-nail pullers, he just stared at her, as though he was seriously expecting her to explain what a gardener was. This was not the kind of crazy they tell you to expect when they're doing their little song and dance

about ‘don’t accept candy from strangers.’ This was just too weird for words. “What?”

“This ‘gardener’ you speak of. Is your relationship with it truly in danger?”

Tayna closed her eyes. “Look, forget about the gardener, alright? We’re fine. Copacetic. I think we’re going for tea and crumpets on Tuesday. I’ve just got one question.”

Again, he stared at her expectantly.

“*What the hell do you want from me?*”

The suddenness of her outburst startled him back a step or two, but he smiled. “Child, you are delightfully strong. If I judge your tone rightly, the ‘gardener’ was a jest. But you are correct—the manner of my approaching you has been rather . . . harsh. Forgive me. It was necessary. One cannot be too cautious in such an unfamiliar place. Seemingly, you live with the minions of Lord Angiron, yet you flee from them, only to seek them out again here, under cover of night. You burn, and yet you use it not. Truly you are an enigma. What is your name?”

Tayna’s defenses were suddenly on high alert and she ignored the question. “You know Angiron.” It was not a question.

Duck Man seemed stumped by that one. “Of course. Am I not the Watcher?”

What? The ropes allowed her just enough freedom to reach her hands together and she gave her invisible bracelet a quick turn to settle her nerves. “Listen, Duck Man, or whatever your name is, it’s creeping the hell out of me that we’re standing here and talking some secret language I didn’t even know I could speak, but let’s forget about that for now, ‘cause even speaking the same language, it’s like we’re from completely different planets or something. Just because I know the words doesn’t mean I have any idea what you’re talking about. Could you maybe tell me something useful? Like why you jump me every time I walk past a tree?”

Duck Man nodded sagely. “Even when you jest, you cut deeply into the veil.” He glanced nervously up the hill, as though expecting trouble at any moment. “You have many questions,” he said. “Yet,

time washes over us and if we do not make haste, we shall still be here for the trapper's sport when he returns."

Tayna's eyes instinctively flicked up the hill to where he had been looking. "You're just as worried about running into him as I am, aren't you?"

"Indeed," he said. "Though I do not fear him, as perhaps you do."

"Look," Tayna said. "Maybe we can help each other out a bit. You sound like a nice guy. Why don't you untie me and we can get out of here. Then I'll teach you how to play twenty questions."

Duck Man stared deeply into Tayna's face for several moments, then he shook his head. "You are cunning, child, but you do not yet see all the paths in your own forest, nor understand who walks upon which."

Tayna sighed.

Duck Man smiled at her frustration. "Know this, child. I am the Watcher and you are in my gaze. Soon, our trail *will* deliver us to an appropriate clearing, whereupon I shall reveal to you another path. Once you have seen its fullness, there you shall have your freedom. I will invite you then to make a journey with me, and upon the end of *that* trail, what answers there are to give can be freely shared between us." Then he took hold of the length of rope dangling from the knot at her elbow. "But until then, we must hasten away from this spot. Come." He set off at an angle, up the hill and to the right of the main path. Tayna had no choice but to follow.

She didn't like the look of this. Creepy-boy here was dragging her off the path into the bushes. She had a vague memory of some advice she'd heard or read somewhere. Try to get the killer to see you as a person instead of a victim. It may weaken his will to hurt you. "Uh, since we're going to be all buddy-buddy, you might as well call me Tayna. What should I call you? Duck Man?"

He looked back at her over his shoulder. "A charming name to add to my collection, no doubt, but you may call me Veest."

"Okay. Veest. That's a nice name. I had an uncle named Veest once. Do you know him?"

The old man didn't slow down, but he did glance back over his shoulder at her. Despite their obviously different upbringings, some

body language is universal. The look clearly said, "Yeah, right. What kind of moron-flakes do you think I eat?"

Tayna grinned sheepishly. "Okay, sorry. It was worth a shot. But, uh, why did we leave the trail?"

He seemed to ignore her as he continued to stride ahead with his long legs breasting through the snow, drawing Tayna forward in his wake. He remained silent until they had broken past a tall pine. "There," he said, pointing back down toward the main trail. "That is why I have diverted you from your path."

Tayna turned to look. "Oh my God." What she saw almost made her heave. Angiron's tracks emerged on the far side of the pine tree, from beneath those low-hanging branches she had been about to duck under. In an open space between there and the next tree, three small animals—a fox and two squirrels—floated helplessly in the air. Their bodies writhed and twisted, but they made no sound. Below them, a large hare lay dead in a patch of snow stained with its own blood and skewered to the ground by a familiar length of stick. A carved skull on the end gleamed at her with blood-red, ruby eyes.

"Can you do something for them?" she said, weakly. The floating creatures looked like they were in agony.

Veest shook his head. "I have life-magic. It can do nothing against this."

Right. He has magic. Of course he does. Still, no better explanation offered itself to her. "We have to do *something!*"

Veest turned and looked at her. "To enter the clearing is to take the trapper's bait. Their fate would become your own."

Tayna looked at him in horror. "You mean, they're suffering there . . . because of me?"

The older man nodded. "It is well that you would ease their suffering, but to enter the circle unprepared would be folly."

"And there's really nothing we can do for them?"

He shook his head. "Lord Angiron's power flows from the dead. Like mine, yours flows from life. The magics of life and of death do not walk the same path."

"So that's a 'no?'"

Veest thought for a moment and then he offered her a grim smile.

“Indeed. That was a ‘no.’” Then he reached out and, to Tayna’s surprise, released the knot at her elbow and unwound the cord.

She looked up at him in surprise. “You’re letting me go?”

Veest looked amused. “Did I not so promise?”

Tayna wasn’t sure of half of the things he’d said. It was possible that he’d promised something like this. It was also possible he’d promised her a death by slow torture; the Swedish mimes were still making a mess of his dialogue. But the fact that he’d untied her was a point in his favor. “So now what?” she asked.

“Your previous path wandered into the snare unprepared. Now you are set upon a new path and you must choose. It may pass that I hold answers to the riddles that beset you. If you would seek the wonder in that, you must travel the way with me, to a quiet place for the seeking. If you would not, then it were best that you decide now and make your haste before the trapper returns.” He pointed at the floating animals to underscore his point.

“Answers to what riddles?” she asked.

“The greatest riddles,” he said. “Who you are, where you come from, the purpose of your life . . .”

The words went through Tayna like an electric current as they triggered a memory—something from her dream. “You know my parents? They’re really alive? And they’re in trouble? Have you come to take me to them?” The words came out even before she could plan what to say, and they startled her almost as much as they seemed to startle the old man.

He looked at her uncertainly for a moment and then raised his shoulders in a shrug. “Am I not the Watcher? I know many things, and suspect a great many more, but how can we know where our feet will wander if we do not first take a step?”

Tayna didn’t know what to think. Angiron’s trap made it fairly plain that Lies had been right all along—he was trying to kill her. Then there was the wacko dream message to consider, about her having a family and them being in some kind of danger. Next thing you know, ol’ Ducky here shows up and says he might know what’s going on, but he also admits to knowing Angiron. And how exactly did he know so much about her,

anyway? He knew that she lived in the orphanage. It wouldn't take a PhD. in Villainy for him to guess what an orphan would want to hear. On the other hand, he couldn't be in cahoots with Angiron—he'd actually kept her from walking straight into the trap, hadn't he? Tayna twisted again at her bracelet. Things just weren't adding up! Maybe this Veest guy was playing his own angle. The fact that he had saved her from one trap didn't necessarily mean that he didn't have one of his own lined up. Psychopaths were probably very territorial about their victims. She looked back at the struggling animals again and then at the old man. In reality, her options were pretty limited. And strange as he might seem, he just might be the safest choice. Besides, it wasn't as if she had a long list of other places to go.

"If I did come with you," she said, carefully. "There'd be no funny stuff, right?" Veest looked at her with a befuddled expression. Tayna sighed. "You wouldn't, like, hurt me or anything, right? No more ropes? No electrical probes or inappropriate touching? No more sneaking up on me when it gets dark?"

Veest shook his head in bewilderment. "If my suspicions are borne true, than I will prove incapable of harming you—in any way—just as you are incapable of harming me."

Tayna snickered. "Oh, I think I could find some way to leave my mark."

Veest frowned and rubbed his shin. "Yes. When you believe yourself to be in grave danger, the Dragon's Peace is lifted, and clearly you do not lack talent for the task. But you have no such belief of danger now. You cannot strike me."

Without warning, Tayna lashed out at him again with Mr. Kicky Foot, but to her complete and utter astonishment, the air thickened around her like hot taffy and her leg came to a dead stop several inches short of his. As soon as she stopped straining to complete the kick, the air resistance dissolved and her foot dropped back into the snow.

"What the hell was that?"

Again Veest glanced up the hill. "A million questions, but only a handful of moments. There is no time for answers now. You must decide. With me or with none, you must leave this place quickly, as must I. Choose."

Despite her reluctance, Tayna had already made her choice. There were just too many signals pointing the same way. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

If Veest was surprised by her decision he didn’t let on. He turned immediately and struck off down the trail. “Hurry. This way.” Tayna moved to follow, but then she paused and looked back toward the trap—the one that had been meant for her, and that had instead only succeeded in trapping several small, helpless creatures. It was like they were being punished for something she had done, and as soon as she put it that way, Tayna couldn’t live with it, no matter what Ducky said. Instinct took over. Before she lost her nerve, she turned around and darted back toward the blood-drenched snow. She could hear Duck Man yelling for her to stop, but she ignored him. When she reached the skewered hare, she snatched both it and Angiron’s staff from the snow, and, whispering a silent apology to the dead rabbit, hurled them into the black night, toward the river.

The moment the staff pulled free of the ground, the hovering animals dropped into the snow and lay there panting. Behind her, Veest burst from the bushes with one arm raised above his head, whirling something at the end of a string. He was singing a deep, forceful melody, but as the offensive trap arced across the snow and into the water, his song died on his lips. He looked around in confusion. All of this, however, was too much excitement for the exhausted creatures and they each dragged themselves off into the underbrush. Veest let his arm drop and the object that he had been whirling over his head stopped in its arc and the shrill note it had been emitting died away.

“You are not ensnared,” he said, looking mystified.

Tayna looked around, more than a little surprised herself. “Apparently not.”

Veest hurried forward and clasped her by the shoulders. He turned her left and right, looking at her carefully. When he was satisfied that she was unharmed, he released her, but he still looked agitated, peering one way and then another into the darkened trees that surrounded them. “Now is not the time to seek the wonder in it. For now, be thankful for the fact of it. We must hurry away. However you came to break the trap

he has set for you, Lord Angiron will now be aware that you have done so and his return will be swift.” The old man took Tayna by the shoulder and urged her back the way they had come. Sensing the new urgency in his voice, she followed without complaint.

The two of them pushed on through the snow in silence for another ten minutes, with Veest stopping every now and then to listen for sounds of pursuit. After several minutes, he finally turned sharply aside and clambered straight up the steep bank of the coulee. Tayna was surprised at how well he moved through the snow, even with the hip-waders slowing him down.

“Where do you get your fashion advice?” Tayna asked. “Clown school?”

Veest paused and looked down at his wardrobe—the pink coat tucked into green rubber pants. “Surely they are appropriate for your world,” he said, looking somewhat confused by the question. “I found them here.”

“Never mind,” she said. “It’s a long story. But next time, try the mall. The dumpster look is definitely not working for you.”

The old man looked at her curiously for a moment, and then shrugged and turned to resume his march up the coulee slope. Tayna followed along, trying hard to suppress the amused grin that kept sneaking onto her face, but she was only marginally successful.

They reached the top of the rise at a place just beyond the interpretive center. The weather had turned while they were down in the protected fold of the valley, and now it was getting mean. Tiny pellets of ice and snow sleeted into their faces, driven by a swirling wind that came at them from across the open plain. They were less than thirty yards from the entrance to the center’s coffee shop, but Tayna could barely see it through the snow, and the wind nipped at them in shrieks and whistles, making it hard to hear or be heard. With one arm thrown across his eyes for protection, Veest bent down to thrust his other hand into the snow, and then withdrew it, clutching a small fistful of dry, hard soil. He then moved forward, probing anxiously into a snow drift with an extended toe. After several attempts, he nodded in satisfaction and crouched down, beckoning Tayna forward to come see. Taking his free

hand from his face, Veest brushed at the snow, exposing a white rock about the size of a child's head.

"Life and death brought together with non-life," he shouted, apparently for her benefit.

She nodded to tell him that she'd heard. The old man slapped the handful of dirt down onto the stone and opened his mouth in . . . song? His lips were moving, anyway, and she thought she heard a note or two, before the wind caught the melody and flung it away.

When he was done, Veest threw a quick smile at her and stood up. At first there was nothing. Then, through a brief pause in the wind, she heard a faint sizzling, like eggs on a hot pan or the sound of television static. Veest waved an arm out toward the snowy field in front of him. "The way opens!" he shouted. A circle of snow collapsed around Veest's rock. And then, beside it, another. And then another. Soon there were fifty or sixty similar holes in the snow, arranged in a large circle. From the bottom of each, a white stone glistened up at the howling sky. Veest turned to her and cupped his hands to yell over the howling night.

"It seems to take longer on the winter side. It often—"

Suddenly, his eyes went wide as he looked over Tayna's shoulder, but before he could say another word, a scarlet rose appeared on the old man's shoulder, spinning him halfway around before he pitched headlong into the snow. Tayna whipped around and peered into the night. A shape was stalking toward them from around the corner of the interpretive center, purposefully, striding directly into the wind. Angiron.

And he was reloading his rifle.

Before Tayna could scream, Veest regained his feet and grabbed her by the arm. He staggered forward across the ring of stones, pulling her along behind him. She tried to yell at him, but the wind shredded her words as they left her lips. She wanted to ask, "Where is there to go? What's the point in running?" They'd lost. Angiron had won. But then, as she stumbled along behind him, across the far edge of the circle, everything changed. Winter vanished. The storm vanished. The snow and the building vanished. Angiron vanished. Tayna was left standing in stunned amazement, surrounded by brilliant colored trees, standing

on the bank of a rapidly flowing stream, under a warm and sunny azure sky of summer.

“Cool,” she said. And then she passed out.

Invitation to the Full Edition

So. How did I do? Did I give you a complete enough story to catch your interest? Is Tayna the kind of person you're starting to care about? Where is she now? What's going on? Who are all these people and what do they want from her? Why is everybody so mean to her? If you're asking questions like that, then I'll make two promises. First, I promise to actually answer them in this series. (Don't you just hate it when books forget to tie up all the loose ends?) Second, I promise to keep the surprises coming. Tayna's in for a wild ride, and so are you. If that sounds like a fair deal, then I invite you to click on one of these links to have a peek at the full ebook:

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Finally, if you like what you've seen of Tayna and her world, please consider sharing this preview with your friends. In fact, feel free to send it to every person you've ever met. I promise I don't mind. :-)

Anyway, that's it for me. I look forward to seeing you online soon.

Meanwhile, keep your ears on,

Jefferson Smith

February, 2013