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"... a wonderful sense of mystery and anticipation...has a fresh, creative feel. The DEMON QUEEN AND THE LOCKSMITH is well written, fast paced and full of suspense."

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*(Elisheva Levin, Ragamuffin Studies)*

The Demon Queen and The Locksmith is a 2010 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Semifinalist.

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**THE DEMON QUEEN AND THE LOCKSMITH**

by

Spencer Baum

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Spencer Baum

The Demon Queen and The Locksmith

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**THE DEMON QUEEN AND THE LOCKSMITH**

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## Chapter 1

Kevin Browne arrived at the park with a rust-colored stain on his shirt and a thick film of bloody saliva in his throat. He had been in his first ever fistfight that morning. He lost. Blackstone Park was the end point of his retreat. Hidden inside a forgettable neighborhood and shaded with the tallest, thickest elm trees in Turquoise, Blackstone Park was safe from the prying eyes of adults who might wonder why a fourteen-year-old was out and about on this, the first day of the school year. Blackstone Park was also far from campus, far from the stares and snickers of his classmates at Turquoise High School, far from those who stood witness to the pummeling he had received at the hands of Ruben Graves.

At least, that's what Kevin imagined as he ambled through the alleys behind Jefferson Avenue. Just off the school grounds, he had seen a sparrow bathing in the remains of a mud puddle. His head, fogged in panic and pain, twisted that sparrow into a ridiculous vision that had been with him ever since. He saw himself lying on his back under a tall elm tree, waving his arms up and down, soaking himself in the wet grass of Blackstone Park like a bird in the mud.

He was disappointed to find other people in the park when he arrived. A guy and a girl, maybe his age or a little older. He might have seen them around town before, but he didn't know their names. The guy was standing, his back against the tree, his nose in a book. The girl sat cross-legged a few feet from the tree trunk, holding a small pair of binoculars to her eyes as she looked into the branches above her. They had the same dark brown hair, the girl's long and straight, the guy's thick and unkempt. It was odd that they, like him, weren't in school.

He needed a different place to hide. He had to be alone right now. The thought of--

Too late. He'd been spotted. It was the girl. She had turned his way and was looking at him through her binoculars.

"Hello!" she shouted.

"Hi," Kevin responded. His voice came out airy and weak.

The girl stood up. She approached, walking with a confidence that made Kevin nervous. What did she want?

"I'm Jackie," she said. She put her binoculars in her pocket and extended her right hand. Kevin shook it.

"I'm Kevin."

"Nice to meet you, Kevin. What happened to your face?"

Kevin's intestines knotted. A gruesome image of how he might look came to mind. He envisioned his too-pale skin turning purple and black under his left eye, his already large nose swollen larger still, his nostrils pushed up and out by a fat upper lip.

"I was in a fight," he said.

Jackie's eyebrows sprung up her forehead. "A fight? With whom?"

With whom? Kevin nearly laughed and let out a phony cough to cover himself. Who said with whom other than English teachers?

"I'm fine. It was at school."

Her eyes drifted past Kevin to the backpack on his shoulders. He felt ridiculous and wished he wasn't wearing it.

"It was just some guy named Ruben." Kevin waved his hand, like it was no big deal. It occurred to him that he looked terrible, but to someone who hadn't seen the fight, he hadn't necessarily lost. For all this girl knew, Ruben might look even worse.

"You're going to have a black eye tomorrow if you don't put some ice on it," Jackie said.

"I...don't I have a black eye already?" Kevin asked, mortified at how weak his voice sounded. He cleared his throat.

"No, it's just swollen." She stepped closer. Kevin stepped away.

"It's alright," she said in a voice one might use when approaching a stray dog. "I just want to look at it."

"Okay," Kevin said. This girl, having known him for less than a minute, stepped right into his space. Every cell in his body went on alert. His already queasy stomach contracted. With a casual manner, as if nothing at all was unusual about this encounter, Jackie reached up and touched Kevin's face, lightly pressing under his eye with two fingers.

"Yes, I think you'll have a black eye tomorrow," she said, her voice tickling his cheek with its proximity. Her breath smelled like ginger cookies.

She stepped back once. Kevin stepped back twice. He tried to shrug his shoulders, as if fist-fighting was something he did every day and black eyes were a normal part of his life. Under the weight of his backpack, his shoulder shrug was more of an awkward lurch. He tried to turn that lurch into one fluid movement where he would slide his backpack all the way off, but a corner of his thick biology textbook pressed through the canvas and caught his spine on the way down.

"Ow," he hissed. The backpack fell to the ground with a thud.

Jackie cringed. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, fine," Kevin said. "So what are you guys doing at the park?"

"I'm bird-watching, and my brother Joseph, as you can see, is reading. Hey Joseph! Come over here!"

Joseph was still against the tree, his eyes in his book. "Just a minute!" he shouted back.

"He loves that book," Jackie said. "We should just go over there, because he won't move from that spot until he's finished the last page."

Leaving his backpack on the ground, Kevin followed her to the middle of the park, toward Joseph and the large elm tree that shaded him.

"Is school out for the day?" she asked.

"No, I'm ditching. It's fourth period now," Kevin said.

Jackie smirked. "Ditching?"

"You know... I was just sick of being there today. How come you guys aren't in school?"

"We homeschool," said Jackie.

"Oh."

They walked a few paces.

"So, how does that work?" Kevin asked. "Do your parents teach you?"

"When we were little they did a lot of teaching, but now they mostly leave us to learn whatever we want," said Jackie. "Sometimes we write reports about what we're learning, for the government--"

"They have to have their hands in everybody's business, of course," said Joseph as he snapped his book shut.

"Uh-oh. Here we go," said Jackie. "Don't mind him. Joseph has some strange opinions."

"You don't have to say it like I'm a wacko," Joseph said.

Kevin glanced at the cover of Joseph's book. The Great Unsolved Mysteries: Volume 7.

"It's a good book," Joseph said, "have you read it?"

Kevin shook his head.

"Of course he hasn't read it, hardly anyone's read it," Jackie said.

"Well, more people should. If we all just opened our eyes a little, we'd be amazed at what we saw."

"Spoken just like your idol," Jackie said.

"His idol?" asked Kevin.

"Lou Sweeney," said Jackie. "He was a radio announcer. Joseph's practically in love with him."

"He is a radio announcer, not he was, Jackie, and he is more than just a radio announcer. He's an author, a detective, a voice of reason in troubled--"

A cannon blast of sound ripped the air.

"What the hell was that?" Joseph said.

Kevin shook his head. Jackie stood on her tiptoes, looking toward Turquoise Mountain. The air was silent again. Kevin replayed the sound in his head, trying to recognize it.

"Maybe it was a gas explosion," said Jackie. "I don't see anything, though. I hope no one was hurt."

Joseph let out a yelp and jumped away from the tree.

"What's with you?" Jackie asked.

"The tree dripped on me," Joseph said. He moved his hand through his hair. "It isn't bird poop, is it?"

"I'm sure it's just water from the rain last night. Let me see."

Joseph crouched so his sister could look at the top of his head. Just before Joseph bent his knees, Kevin realized that these siblings were the same height.

"Who's older?" Kevin asked.

"We're twins," said Jackie. She ran her hand through Joseph's hair, rubbed her fingertips together, and declared, "Sap."

"Gross," said Joseph. "Is it all sticky?"

"Yes," said Jackie, now looking up into the tree. "It's strange, this elm shouldn't be leaking sap."

"She makes fun of me for my interests," said Joseph, "but now let's see who's weird. This girl can tell you about every kind of tree in New Mexico, and every bird, every bug, every coyote."

Jackie ignored her brother. She felt the bark of the tree with her palm, looking up into the branches.

"It's sick," Jackie said.

Joseph rolled his eyes. "You sound like a hippie," he said.

"Feel how dry it is," said Jackie. "It rained all night. It shouldn't be this dry."

Joseph touched the tree.

"Feels fine to me," he said.

"Well it's not fine," said Jackie.

"Maybe it just hasn't had time to soak up the water," said Joseph.

"There's been time," said Jackie.

Kevin approached the tree as well. He stroked the bark, feeling for dryness.

"Its color isn't right either," said Jackie.

"What's that vibrating?" Kevin asked.

"What vibrating?" said Jackie. She was now engrossed in her study of the tree. Kevin followed her eyes into the branches, and saw a lone butterfly perched near the top.

"That vibration in the tree," Kevin said. "Do you think it's from the ground?" He removed his hands and the vibration stopped. He put his hands back on the tree and it started again.

"I don't feel anything," said Jackie. She leaned in, touching her ear to the tree. Joseph too pressed his hands more intently against the trunk.

"You've got to feel that," said Kevin. "I can feel the whole tree buzzing."

"I don't feel anything," said Jackie. "Do you feel something Joseph?"

"No," Joseph said, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Joseph now had both hands, his chest, and his cheek pressed against the tree.

"Maybe it's the Turquoise Hum," Joseph said with a smirk on his face. Kevin shot Joseph a dirty look, thinking about everything he'd like to say about 'The Turquoise Hum,' but a loud snap from inside the tree interrupted his thoughts.

Joseph and Jackie stepped away from the tree trunk.

Another snapping noise. It sounded like a thunderclap, or the cracking of the world's largest wishbone. The exact sound was one Kevin had never heard, but was a noise to which his body was preprogrammed to respond. With no conscious effort on his part, his feet began taking him away from the tree.

More cracks. One loud pop after another, separated by squeaking, ripping, snapping, grinding... faster, more urgent cracks became crackling...tearing, slipping...

Kevin scanned the tree from bottom to top. The butterfly had left its perch on the branch above them and drifted in the breeze to the other side of the tree. Like a feather landing on a quiet lake, the butterfly touched down on the branch farthest from Kevin.

And the tree broke.

One loud burst of sound signaled the end, and the base of the trunk was a small explosion of bark and sawdust. There was a silence as it fell. Two seconds of anticipation, then a small earthquake of an impact. A shockwave rippled through the soil. Kevin had to widen his stance to keep from falling.

The fallen tree divided the park in half. There was enough wood on the ground to fill an entire dump truck. A wave of relief came over Kevin. This tree could have fallen in any direction. It happened to fall away from the three teenagers who had been standing underneath it.

A short, jagged stump, no more than two feet tall, remained planted in the earth. A flurry of bugs covered the top of it.

Jackie was the first to approach.

"Termites," she said.

Kevin and Joseph followed her and leaned in for a look. Kevin had never seen live termites before, but what else could these be? What other bugs lived inside a tree that eventually fell over.

They seemed small and innocent, unaware that their own destructive teeth had caused this calamity. Their primary concern was to find a way out of the sun. In orderly lines they filed into small holes in the wood, disappearing into who knew where.

"I wonder why none of them are going down this one," Jackie said, pointing at a large hole in the center of the stump. As if in answer to her question, an ooze of thick, clear liquid bubbled up and filled the center hole. As the last termites burrowed their way into the smaller holes on the perimeter, sap continued gurgling from the hole in the center, spilling over the top of the stump, flowing through tiny channels in the wood.

"It smells like cinnamon," Kevin said. He felt a strange and surprising compulsion to taste it.

Joseph crouched down to sniff.

"It does," he said. "Is it supposed to smell like cinnamon?"

"It's not supposed to smell like anything, because it's not supposed to be here," Jackie said. "I've never heard of an elm making so much sap. It must be related to the termites."

"What would the termites have to do with it?" Kevin asked.

"It might be a defense," Jackie said. "I don't know – nature's pretty resourceful. Sometimes trees ooze saps and liquids when they're sick. Maybe it was trying to fill up the holes the termites were making."

Kevin dipped his finger in the sap and brought it to his mouth.

"You shouldn't do that," Jackie said.

But it was too late to stop him. His finger was in his mouth, and the sap was on his tongue. Kevin didn't know why he wanted to taste the sap so much, but he did, and as it rolled down the back of his throat, it seemed like the most sensible decision he had ever made. What do you do when a termite infested tree falls down? Eat the delicious sap inside, of course!

"I can't believe you just did that," Joseph said with a laugh.

"This is the most amazing thing I've ever tasted!" Kevin said. He scooped up a bigger glob of sap with his finger and stuffed it in his mouth. It tasted like cinnamon, sugar, milk, and mint, all at once, and in perfect proportion.

Joseph laughed harder now. "You're a nut! You're just putting it in your mouth, you don't even know what it is!"

"Try it," Kevin said, rolling the sap around with his tongue. The sap was better than just sweet cinnamon and sugar. It was like the coolest drink of water on the hottest summer day, the most sumptuous candy, the most nourishing food, the most healing medicine. He could swear that his whole body was thanking him for this deliciousness.

"It does smell good," Joseph said. He put a dollop on the tip of his finger and brought it to his lips.

“You’re not kidding!” Joseph rushed to put his hand back in the sap and get a bigger scoop.  
“Jackie, you have to try this!”

Kevin felt like his mind was growing sharp, like his body was awakening from a deep, restful nap.

“It’s like a drug,” Kevin said as he dipped his finger in for more.

“Like a drug?” said Jackie. “You guys are scaring me.”

“Quit worrying and try it already,” said Joseph. He stuffed his copy of *The Great Unsolved Mysteries: Volume 7* into his back pocket, freeing both hands to dig into the sap, which continued oozing out of the hole.

“I think I’ll pass,” Jackie said.

A picture came to Kevin’s mind that was so clear and so filled with joy that he acted it out. The picture was of him playfully putting a drop of sap on Jackie’s lips with the same self-assurance she possessed when she inspected his injured eye. Without thinking, he made it happen, dipping his finger back into the sweet liquid and smearing it on Jackie’s lips before she could turn away.

“Hey!” she said with a start, but her face went deadly serious. “Oh...you weren’t...that’s amazing,” she said.

“I told you!” Joseph shouted, and gestured at the tree stump, inviting Jackie to have more.

She obliged, and for a few glorious minutes, the three of them licked up every drop of sap the tree stump gave them. They took turns, each as eager as the others, but all content to share.

“It’s like liquid happiness,” Joseph said.

“If we could bottle this and sell it, we’d be millionaires,” said Kevin.

“When I get home, I’m finding out what this is,” said Jackie. “I can’t believe I’ve never heard of this before. Surely we’re not the first to discover it.”

“Who knows? Maybe we are,” said Kevin. He felt like the world might be full of surprises he’d never considered before. Maybe there was delicious sap or something like it inside every tree, if one only knew where to look.

Joseph scraped the inside of the hole with his finger. “I wonder where the termites went.”

“They might have a nest under this tree,” said Jackie. “I definitely want to research further, and maybe come back when I know more about what to look for.”

“Bugs and trees and a quiet afternoon in the park – this is like your dream come true, isn’t it?” said Joseph.

“Pretty much,” Jackie said with a big smile. “Look Kevin, you’ve got a friend!”

“I know,” Kevin said. He turned his head to look at the butterfly perched on his shoulder.

“I think this is the same one that was in the tree earlier,” he said. Something about the way the sun reflected off the butterfly’s back, its regal stance on his shirt...Still in a spell of happiness, Kevin allowed himself to become mesmerized in the butterfly’s orange and black wings. Warmth radiated from his stomach through his body, and he felt himself growing calm as he looked at this peaceful butterfly.

Even though he felt a quiet inside him, the world around Kevin was a symphony of sounds. He could hear Joseph’s breathing, Jackie’s heartbeat. A robin chirped from a nearby tree. The sap had made him so high, so alert, that his ears were doing things they had never done before. They were finding the clicks and rattles of beetles from the far corners of the park. They were relaying information, if not sound in the normal sense, from the air, the ground, even the tree stump. They were picking up some quiet and beautiful sound of the butterfly, a tiny flute on his shoulder.

With two flaps of its wings, the butterfly took off. As the butterfly flew away, the peaceful bubble that had been Kevin’s world began to stretch. There was a strain on imaginary walls. For some reason, Kevin didn’t want the butterfly to leave. There was so much peace in that butterfly.

“We should follow it,” Kevin said.

The butterfly bounced through the air, drifting away from them.

“Yes,” said Jackie. “We should.”

## Chapter 2

Turquoise, New Mexico is named after a mountain that overlooks the city. The people of Turquoise have a complicated relationship with their mountain. Some believe you aren't truly a citizen of Turquoise unless you regularly hike the mountain. Others believe the mountain wishes to be left alone, that it's rude to get too close. Turquoise Mountain is so named because its peak turns a blue-green color when it reflects the afternoon sky, leading early settlers to believe the mountaintop was covered in valuable turquoise gemstone. Many residents still think the mountain is loaded with the blue-green rock, even though no evidence of a turquoise deposit has ever been found there.

In the 1980's, Wideband Communications Company built the world's highest radio tower on top of Turquoise Mountain. They claimed the mountain was the perfect place to broadcast microwave signals to and from satellites orbiting the earth. The people of Turquoise called the tower "The Dunce Cap" in reference to its inverted cone shape, and demanded that it be removed. To protect the tower, Wideband Communications made a deal with the city council to share the lucrative revenue generated by The Dunce Cap. The deal divided Turquoise in two: those who favored the tower and the money it generated, and those who thought it an eyesore not worthy of their mountain for any price.

The money won and the tower stayed, but over the years it became the subject of even greater controversy. Many people came to believe The Dunce Cap was the source of The Turquoise Hum.

For Kevin, Turquoise Mountain, The Dunce Cap, and the controversy of it all loomed large. Turquoise Mountain was central in the life of his dad and the death of his mom. After his mom died, Kevin and his dad made a trip to Turquoise Mountain. Neither had been back since.

As Kevin, Jackie, and Joseph chased a butterfly through the back streets of town, as they scaled wooden coyote fences, trespassed on other people's property, ran through back alleys and across dirt roads, Kevin realized that this chase might well end at the mountain. He also noticed a strange ringing in his ears.

Both observations made him uncomfortable, and he tried to put them out of his mind.

The butterfly bounced just above Kevin's head, always a few feet in front of him. Joseph and Jackie ran on either side. It flew much faster than Kevin would have expected, but, then again, he had never chased a butterfly before.

It led them across Eastern Avenue, past the old mission church which marked the edge of town, and into open space, where it increased its speed.

"You guys, look how fast we're running!" Jackie yelled.

Kevin looked at the ground underneath his spinning feet. Tall grass, sagebrush, and rabbit-holes flew past, almost like he was looking out the window of a moving car. And even after a few minutes of crazy fast running, Kevin felt good, like he could run a marathon if he had to.

He turned to look behind him. In barely a minute, they had run so far that the old mission chapel was small in the distance. A few hundred yards to their right was State Road 150. A lone car, a black Neptune with dark tinted windows, drove in the same direction they ran. From the distance, it appeared the car was going no faster than they were.

The butterfly led them on a diagonal away from the highway. Kevin wondered if they'd be able to find their way home. He took another look back. Joseph and Jackie both had their eyes glued on the butterfly. Jackie was smiling.

In the midst of a full-on sprint, Jackie had a grin on her face that made Kevin feel good. Her grin made him wonder if this would be a moment they would remember when they were old. Having never spoken before today, the three of them had witnessed the toppling of a giant elm tree, had eaten the sap inside, and now...

*Now they were following a butterfly out of town?*

It was strange, but it felt right. And it wouldn't have happened if Kevin was still in school. This adventure had started when Ruben beat him up.

That's why we have to keep going, Kevin told himself. The day had started out terribly, and now he was making it into something good. The past year of his life had been unspeakably miserable, but maybe

now it was turning around. He was supposed to be in school, he would probably be in trouble tomorrow for this little adventure, but Jackie was smiling. He and his new friends were doing something spontaneous that just felt right, and any adult who wanted to yell at him about it later could go to hell for all he cared.

It was difficult for Kevin to latch onto the reality of what was happening. Were they really running this fast? Did he really feel this good? His level of awareness was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Even as the landscape flew past, Kevin could pick out any rock, any pebble, and view it with high definition clarity in the quarter second before it was gone from his field of view. And his ears – what was going on with his ears? The odd sensation he had experienced at Blackstone Park, the sense that all the sounds around him somehow melded into a beautiful, sensible music, remained.

Kevin turned his focus back to the butterfly. It approached a long chain-link fence with a roll of barbed wire along the top. This was meant to be the end of the road. The butterfly would cross over this fence and they would lose it. But an outrageous thought grew in Kevin's mind as the fence came closer.

Jump.

There wasn't time to think about it. He would either have to stop cold or do it. Ten more steps, five more, two more...

Kevin's feet sprung from the ground and he soared with ease. He tucked his legs underneath him, and cleared the fence like an Olympic hurdler. He landed gracefully on the other side.

"Did you guys see what I just did?" Kevin called back.

"Woohoo!" Joseph shouted, right behind him. Joseph was so high in the air he briefly blocked the sun from Kevin's eyes. He soared over Kevin's head and landed on his feet, a stone's throw or more from Kevin's landing point.

Jackie was next. Watching her jump from start to finish, several seconds in the air, clearing the fence, Kevin allowed himself to realize just how abnormal this was.

"What's happened to us?" Jackie said, her face a burst of excitement.

"The butterfly's getting away!" Joseph yelled. He took the lead, and they followed, leaving their questions for another time.

In the open field at full speed, it was clear where they were going. The butterfly was taking them to Turquoise Mountain.

The flat desert gave way to a slow, steady hill, with a few trees speckling the open terrain. Wildflower blossoms and juniper berries began scenting the air. Open grassland became sparse orchard became mountain forest. The butterfly danced between the branches of aspens and pines as they wove through the tree trunks below. Sunlight and shadow flickered in Kevin's eyes as he ran. His thoughts drifted into the past for an instant, and although his eyes stayed on the butterfly, his mind didn't, and he lost it.

"Where did it go?" Joseph said. The edge of panic in Joseph's voice brought Kevin back to the present. After an exuberant chase that took them to the base of Turquoise Mountain, the butterfly was gone.

His ears were ringing. He had denied it the entire way, but it was happening. A low, resonant noise, rich and deep -- it seemed to vibrate his skull.

"Do you guys hear something?" Kevin asked.

Joseph threw Kevin a look of confusion that answered his question.

Kevin covered his ears. No change. He bent down. No change. Leaning over, his eyes caught something sparkling on the ground.

A shiny rock, half-buried amidst fallen pine cones. Kevin took two careful, quiet steps, each one feeling loud and deliberate after miles of running. Kevin felt like he had been to this exact spot on the mountain before.

A few paces behind the shiny rock lay a steep downward slope, one wall of a natural ditch cut into the mountainside by a small creek. Kevin knew the creek by the sound of its flow. A memory crawled forward in his mind: cool mountain water, splashed on his cheeks, washing away tears.



He reached into the jumble of pine cones and twigs and retrieved the shiny rock. The size of a baseball, clear and finely cut, it wasn't the sort of rock one just finds out in the forest.

Kevin picked it up.

"What is that?" Joseph asked.

"It looks like a crystal," Jackie said.

Kevin shuttered. Crystal was a dirty word in his mind, closely intertwined with the hum and years of resentment.

The crystal broke the midday sunlight into a prism of color. Something familiar about the sounds and scenery set off a tickle in the back of Kevin's throat.

"Are you alright?" Joseph said.

It took Kevin a second before he realized Joseph was talking to him.

"Kevin?" Jackie said. "Kevin, are you crying?"

The breeze was cool on Kevin's cheeks. They were wet.

"I'm fine," he said. "Don't worry about it. I've just got some memories of this place."

"There it is!" Joseph shouted, pointing at the butterfly. It was ten feet ahead of them, bounding downward into the ditch. It took up a path directly above the creek.

"Do you want to stop, Kevin?" Jackie asked. "You seem like you're not having fun anymore."

"Oh no, we have to keep going now," Kevin said. "I'll explain later."

Kevin put the crystal in his pocket and they took off after Joseph, skipping down the dirt wall of the ditch and into the creek below.

The current was stronger than Kevin remembered. A cool sheen of water, flowing over a bed of rocks, it was deep enough to cover his sneakers as he ran. Everything about this place was familiar now. Just a few more yards into a hidden valley, walls of spruce would rise up around the stream, they would round a bend...

Kevin knew the emotions on the other side of that bend would be overwhelming. He didn't expect them to knock him off his feet. Everything he remembered was intact, but there was a new addition of such beauty that Kevin could hardly stand it. So he stopped. He planted himself in the middle of a moving stream and fell awkwardly to his knees and then onto his hip, submerging himself from the waist down.

Jackie came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she said.

In front of them, rooted on the ground at the edge of the stream, was a fully grown cottonwood tree. Behind the tree stood a granite face of the mountain, a sheer wall rising more than a hundred feet from the earth. The last time Kevin was here, he had decided it was the prettiest place on Earth. It was even more stunning now.

The last time, the cottonwood was a majestic green, its leaves forming a shiny, vibrant tent. Now its leaves were hidden, as were its branches and trunk, buried underneath a spectacular sight. From the exposed roots on the ground to the top of the highest branch, the entire tree was covered with thousands upon thousands of bright orange butterflies.

"What is this place?" Joseph said.

"It's my mom's place," Kevin said. "It's where we came when she died. We spread her ashes on the roots of this tree."

### Chapter 3

"Benjamin, I want to tell you something, and I need you to put aside your feelings on the subject for a minute."

Kevin's mom had returned from her daily hike. It was a summer evening. Kevin was watching basketball on TV. Normally, a conversation between his parents in the middle of a basketball game would

have been annoying, but this was different. *I need you to put aside your feelings on the subject for a minute.* His mom was about to open a topic that had been closed for years.

"Of course," said his dad, "if it's important to you."

"It is. Today, while I was hiking, I found a place. A wonderful place."

Kevin turned down the volume on the television.

"You should hear this too, Kev," said his mom. "I was following a butterfly. I lost track of it, but I did find a gorgeous mountain river. I followed it. It took me to a pristine valley, there was a cottonwood tree standing alone on the riverbank. It's the only cottonwood I've ever seen on the mountain. It was the most stunning, lovely place I've ever been, and...I don't know why it feels so important, but it does – when I die--"

"What is this?" said Kevin's dad. "When you die?"

"Just hear me out, okay? It's important to me. When I die, I want my ashes spread on the roots of that tree. I've drawn you a map."

She pulled a folded paper from her back pocket.

"You want us to take your...you want us..." Kevin's dad closed his eyes in concentration. "Out of the blue, today you've decided that when you die, you want your remains taken to Turquoise Mountain?"

"Yes, and not out of the blue," said Kevin's mom, pushing the paper into her husband's hands.

"This place is special. I know this isn't easy for you to think about."

"No, if it's important--"

"It is."

"Write it down in the will," said Kevin's dad, handing the folded paper to Kevin. "Lord knows you'll outlive me."

A year later, Kevin and his dad were following his mom's handwritten notes. *Take State Road 150 as far as it goes. Park in the open lot at the end of the road. Walk north into the foothills. Find the Park Service sign.*

They found the river and followed it into the hidden valley. They spread her ashes on the roots of the cottonwood tree. When they got home, Kevin's dad went into the bedroom and didn't come out until the next morning.

Kevin knew his dad would never go back to the mountain after that trip. For Benjamin Browne, Turquoise Mountain was a difficult place even before the death of his wife. To him, Turquoise Mountain was forever tied to "The Hum."

*The Hum. The Hearers. The flowing stream, the chirping birds, the buzzing insects, the music in his ears.* It was the flute of that one butterfly, played a thousand times over, but blended together in a peaceful way. Sitting in a stream, looking upon his mom's place, for a fraction of a second, Kevin allowed an unallowable question: Could I be hearing The Hum?

He shook his head back and forth, trying to throw the thought from his brain.

"What is it, Kevin?" asked Jackie.

"Nothing." He stood up. "I just have lots of emotions tied to this place."

"I bet you do. How old were you when she died?"

"It was just last year."

"I'm so sorry. That must have been hard. I can't even imagine."

Kevin, Joseph, and Jackie were quiet for a time that might have been a minute or an hour. The butterflies took off. They flew up the shear wall and over the mountain, turning the sky orange with their flight.

"We can go," said Kevin. "Thanks for waiting here with me."

Kevin led them up a narrow trail that took them out of the valley. He removed the crystal from his pocket as they hiked, and they passed it among the three of them.

"I've heard that the mountain is full of turquoise," said Joseph. "This is definitely not turquoise."

"Those are just superstitions and misinformation," said Jackie. "There's no turquoise in Turquoise Mountain."

"Don't the Hearers think that crystals--"

"Check out these tracks," Jackie said. Kevin was thankful for her interruption. Joseph was about to take the conversation in a direction Kevin didn't want it to go. Jackie pointed at a line of animal prints in the mud. She made the group stop for a closer look.

"They're not like any other tracks I've seen," she said.

Kevin bent over to look at the deep, oval dents in the mud.

"What's up here?" said Kevin. "Elk?"

"They're not elk prints," said Jackie. "Look how far apart they're spaced. Whatever made these was too big to be an elk."

"Too big to be an elk?" said Kevin. He wondered what lived in the mountains that was bigger than an elk.

"I want to follow them," said Jackie.

"Of course you do," said Joseph. "In case you haven't noticed, Kevin, my sister's a sucker for nature."

Jackie ignored the comment and began following the animal tracks up the mountainside. Kevin and Joseph went after her.

"Do you guys smell smoke?" Kevin asked.

The fresh scents of wildflower and spruce that had welcomed them as they came up the mountain was now masked with the smell of smoke, and under the smoke was a pungent fume like rubbing alcohol. Kevin had the strange thought that if he needed to, he could close his eyes and follow his nose, like a bloodhound.

"People have been up here recently," said Jackie. "These aren't natural smells."

The tracks led them up and around the mountain, the fumes growing stronger with every step. They were turning inward, towards the back side of the mountain and away from the city. Pebbles began to overtake the grass, then rocks, then small boulders. They came to a clearing and found a hole on the mountainside big enough to swallow a car. It was a dark, open cave surrounded by a wide mound of fallen rock. A sheen of dust floated in the air.

Jackie kicked at the pebbles with her shoe. "These rocks cover the animal trail," she said.

The fiery fumes were potent now. It smelled like a gas station.

A step. A slip. The sound of rocks cracking together echoed from inside the cave.

"Someone's in there," Kevin said.

"Maybe it's Jackie's animal," said Joseph.

"I don't think so," said Jackie. "These fumes would drive it away. Maybe we should go."

"You know what this is?" said Joseph. "That explosion we heard at the park. I bet this is it!"

"But where is everybody?" said Jackie. "And what is that smell?"

These were great questions. Not only were there no people around, there were no fences, no cars, there wasn't even any caution tape.

"Maybe they're inside," Joseph said, nodding his head in the direction of the open hole. "I bet this all has something to do with the diamond in Kevin's pocket."

"Diamond?" Kevin said. "You think it's a diamond?"

"Could be," said Joseph. "What if, for all this time, when everyone thought there was turquoise in the mountain, there actually was a diamond mine, and now some secret mining guild came and blasted open the mountain to get the diamonds out."

"It rained all night," Jackie said. "Those tracks would have been washed away. Whatever made them was here today. It's so strange."

"Do you guys hear someone coming?" Kevin asked.

"Miners are probably deep in there pulling out the diamonds as we speak," said Joseph.

"Why would an animal come here, if not to go in the cave?" Jackie said.

"The cave was just formed," Joseph said. "The mining company. The explosion."

"We don't know that for sure," Jackie said.

"Hush you two," Kevin said. "I think someone's coming."

Kevin's ears had found a car off-roading up the mountainside. Kevin had a clear picture in his mind of how far away it was, just from the sound of it.

"Oh my God, Kevin. Your face!" Jackie said.

"What? What's wrong with my face?"

"Nothing! Your black eye, your swollen lip, they're totally healed!"

Totally healed? In all the excitement, Kevin had nearly forgotten that this adventure began on the losing end of a fight. He touched his lip. The tenderness and swelling were gone. He touched under his eye and didn't feel even a sliver of pain.

"Weird," Kevin whispered.

The car came to a stop. Doors opened. People stepped out.

"Someone's up there," said a man's voice. Some effect of the mountain, some echo off the rock, carried the man's voice clearly into Kevin's ears. Even though the man was out of sight, he sounded like he was two steps away.

"Let's get out of here," Joseph said.

They turned and went back down the mountainside.

"Hey, wait right there!" came a shout from below.

Two men emerged from the treeline. Kevin stopped to get a look at them. They were wearing uniforms, like park rangers, or cops.

"Stop! Police!" shouted one of the men.

"Keep going!" Joseph hissed.

Kevin took off in a full sprint down the mountain.

"Stop! Stop, I said!"

The men were racing in a diagonal up the mountain. Joseph and Jackie were already too far ahead, so the men cut their path straight to Kevin. Compared to Joseph and Jackie, the men looked like they were moving in slow motion.

"Damn, those kids are fast," he heard one of the men say as Kevin zipped past them both and into the cover of the trees below.

Trees, rocks, and shrubs whisked behind them as they ran. Kevin saw Jackie leap over a boulder, and Joseph shimmy across a fallen branch with the same agility and ease they possessed on the run up to the mountain. He remembered their earlier leap over a tall, barbed wire fence, and he laughed. The whole afternoon was leaving the boring realm of reality and entering the fun world of dreams. A few hours ago, Kevin was a freshman at Turquoise High School on the losing end of a fight. Now he ran into the open grassland beneath Turquoise Mountain, chasing his new friends, breaking all the rules that were supposed to apply to him, and laughing.

## **Fire Ants**

From *A Treasury of Insects* by Tristan Nelson III

Fire ants in the American South display a strange quirk of nature. Take an animal, or a plant, that has evolved to live in one location, move it to another, and it will usually die. Penguins are ill-equipped to survive in the Sahara. A Canadian pine could not live in the tropics. Drop a man in the middle of the ocean and he will eventually drown.

But sometimes nature flips the coin. Sometimes an animal that might have many natural enemies at home will thrive beyond reason if moved to a location where those enemies don't exist.

So it was with the Brazilian Fire Ant, whose ancestors were targeted by giant anteaters, parasitic maggots, viral fungus organisms, and a thousand other insects in the hyper-competitive world of the rain forest. To survive in Brazil, the fire ant developed a powerful poison sting and an aggressive attitude.

Fire ants arrived in the United States in the 1930's, when a boat traveling from Brazil to the coast of Alabama foolishly used hundreds of pounds of Brazilian sand as ballast. Of course there were fire ants in that sand, and of course they crawled into the many packages of food being delivered to Alabama.

Without their many rain forest enemies to hold them in check, the fire ants flourished. In only a few years, their large mounds came to dominate the landscapes of Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi. Fire ants ruin crops, attack livestock, and occasionally have run-ins with people, with horrifying results.

The world of global trade has helped the fire ant further spread its empire. Cargo ships, the same that transported the ant from Brazil to Alabama, have already taken the ant to China, Australia, and the Philippines. Governments have spent millions trying to slow the spread, with no success. The fire ant can survive wet or dry conditions, in extremes of heat or cold. It is only a matter of time before the fire ant takes its place among nature's greatest conquerors, moving wherever it likes, doing whatever it wishes, paying little mind to the human pests who want to share the fire ant's space on this earth.

## Chapter 4

Jackie and Joseph lived on the outside of town in one of the homes Kevin's dad called a "McMansion."

"Disgusting," his dad would mutter every time they drove past the housing developments on the outskirts of Turquoise. Kevin had learned this opinion wasn't his dad's alone. It was the preferred topic of conversation whenever company was at Kevin's house. Over steaming cups of espresso, Kevin's dad and his weird friends kept close track of the biggest houses in town. They knew which mansions belonged to Hollywood celebrities, which belonged to Las Vegas casino kings, and which were retreats for Texas oil barons. Not caring much either way, Kevin had always assumed his dad was right, that these houses, and the rich people who lived in them, must be "disgusting."

Standing inside Jackie and Joseph's living room, Kevin was angry that his dad was so quick to judge. The big shade trees in the front and back were examples of what Kevin's dad called "phony non-native landscaping," but they were pretty, and probably went hand-in-hand with Jackie's love of nature. A basketball hoop mounted over the garage was the sort of fun touch Kevin wished were present at his house. Inside the living room, there were high ceilings, skylights, a red-brick floor, and in the center of the room, surrounded by tall potted plants, stood a cast iron sculpture Kevin recognized.

"My dad made this," he said, touching the arm of Woman Throwing A Spear.

Jackie took a minute to register. "Benjamin Browne is your father? How cool! Your dad is very talented. My mom loves this sculpture."

"I was in fifth grade when he made this one. It was one of my favorites."

Kevin thought about his dad's current project, a series of ceramic bowls he called "Contained." Kevin missed the days when his dad made sculptures of people and animals.

Across the living room, into the open kitchen, Kevin saw more evidence that his dad had misjudged the people in these homes. Standing on the kitchen counter, underneath the cabinets, was one of his dad's beloved Tingley 2000 Home Barista Espresso machines.

"These machines might change the world," Kevin's dad had once said of his own Tingley machine. "They make espresso at home as easy as coffee or tea. Now that people can be lazy about it, they'll start making their own espresso, and that will bring the whole world one step closer to good taste."

Funding the arts and drinking espresso would make this family popular with Kevin's dad; their apparent reading habit would have appealed to Kevin's mom. The entire side wall of the living room in Joseph and Jackie's house was one giant bookshelf, complete with a library-style sliding ladder. Joseph took *The Great Unsolved Mysteries: Volume 7* out of his back pocket, brushed the dirt off the cover, slid the ladder to one side, climbed up half way, and re-shelved the book. It fit perfectly between Volume 6 and Volume 8 of the same series. On the opposite side of Volume 8 was a thick hardcover book titled *The*

Transcripts of Lou Sweeney. Next to it were A History of The Lou Sweeney Radio Show and Unafraid of the Truth: An Autobiography of Lou Sweeney.

"Wow, Jackie wasn't kidding," Kevin said. "You really like this Lou Sweeney guy."

"The truth, wherever it takes us," Joseph said with a grin. "That's his motto."

"He'd probably be interested in what happened to us today," Jackie said.

Joseph's eyes opened wide. "You're right! I should post something on the fan site."

"Hello, Dorkbrain? Kidding," said Jackie. Joseph furrowed his brow, as if this topic were nothing to kid about.

Kevin looked over the rest of the bookshelf. Someone in the house liked to read classic literature. Someone else liked to read books on science. One shelf was devoted to books on math, another looked like it was all history. But more than half of this bookshelf belonged to Joseph. Unsolved mysteries, conspiracies, missing persons, government cover-ups, aliens in the desert—

A book caught Kevin's eye and screamed for his attention. *Safe Cracking For Fun and Profit*. He pulled it from the shelf.

"You're into safe-cracking?" asked Joseph.

"No," said Kevin, "well, it's interesting to me, that's all."

Kevin opened the book and looked at the first page.

*Safe Cracking For Fun and Profit* by "Sticky Fingers" Smith. *Chapter 1: The Allure of the Locked Door*:

*Human beings are curious creatures. Curious to a fault. Even the most mundane of objects becomes exotic when it is purposely hidden from view.*

"To be honest, I found the book pretty useless," said Joseph. "I followed the instructions to the letter, and have never cracked open a safe."

"That's too bad," Kevin said. He put the book back on the shelf.

"I don't think it's too bad," said Jackie. "Sticky Fingers is probably in jail somewhere right now. No one needs to be breaking into someone else's safe. Unless you're a crook, you know the combination or you call the locksmith."

Kevin opened his mouth to speak his strong opinion on this subject, but was interrupted when the front door opened, and a tall, skinny man stepped inside. The man wore a dirty blue uniform with a white oval patch over the breast pocket. The patch said "Liberty Pest Control."

"Hello, Tom," said Jackie. "You can just leave the bill on the table."

The man nodded at Jackie in acknowledgement and put a piece of paper on the end table.

"Tom, this is Kevin Browne," Jackie said. The tall man stepped into the room and nodded.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Browne," Tom said, in a slow, Southern accent that wasn't at all from Turquoise. "If it's alright with you, I won't shake your hand, seein' as how I've just been bug sprayin' out back."

"Nice to meet you too," Kevin said, his eyes drifting to the Liberty Pest Control logo on Tom's shirt. Kevin, like everyone in town, remembered the great rat infestation of downtown Turquoise, now a few years in the past. Seemingly out of nowhere, a horrible rat problem developed in the office buildings downtown. The city called on Liberty Pest Control to get rid of the rodents. For six months, a large portion of downtown was fenced off and covered with black tarps, the Liberty Pest Control logo affixed to every fence. The news reported that pest control specialists were seeking out the master nest in the sewers. One day the fences and tarps disappeared and the rat problem was over. Kevin hadn't seen the Liberty Pest Control logo since.

"Well, have a good--" Tom stopped himself. An odd look came over his face, like he'd just eaten something sour. Tom reached in his breast pocket and pulled out a clear, plastic box. He took three giant steps across the living room and swung his arm down to the floor, slamming the box into the ground. He trapped an ant, which frantically ran up the box's sides.

Tom slid the box along the floor, and in one smooth motion, tilted it up and snapped a lid on the open end.

"Sorry 'bout that," said Tom. "Don't know how an ant got in here."

"That's okay, Tom," said Jackie.

"A fire ant, even," said Tom. "Very interesting. Well then, I'll just leave the bill on the table."

Tom went through the front door and closed it behind him.

"Our parents are weird," said Jackie. "My dad saw a black widow in the garage right after we moved here, and now pest control comes once a week. I've told my dad we need to cancel the contract and learn to live with the spiders, but he won't do it."

"When do your parents come home?" Kevin asked.

"Dad will be home around 6:00. Mom just left to run some errands, she'll be back soon," Jackie said.

Kevin looked at the clock over the fireplace. 2:30. At school, the day was nearly over.

His fight with Ruben seemed so distant now. Just a few hours in his past, but in his memory, it might as well have been another life.

"Where can I find a mirror?"

"This way," said Jackie. She led Kevin down the hall, to a bathroom with tiled countertops and a storage pantry built into the back wall. Kevin flipped on the light, and found his face just as Jackie had described it, completely unblemished. His skin was soft, his cheeks were the right color, nothing was swollen, nothing was damaged. His complicated plan for the evening: dumpsters, Kung Pao Chicken, avoiding his dad – it was all unnecessary now. The only evidence left of a morning gone wrong was the stain on his shirt, which was easily explained with any one of a thousand believable stories.

"You're sure I didn't look like this when we met at the park?"

"Yes," said Jackie. "This morning you looked like you'd just stepped out from a war. This whole half of your face was puffy and bruised."

Jackie gently prodded the skin underneath Kevin's eye, exactly as she had done at the park. This time it didn't hurt at all.

"Do you always heal this quickly?" Jackie asked.

"No. At least, I don't think so," said Kevin, realizing he had no prior experience with black eyes before today.

"It was the sap," said Joseph. He popped his head through the door. "Don't you think?"

"That's my guess too," said Jackie. "I want to go research it. But I also don't want to sit down, you know?"

She did a little shuffle from one foot to the other.

"I'm feeling antsy too," said Joseph. "I think we're hopped up on adrenaline and whatever else is flowing in our blood since we ate that sap."

Kevin leaned in closer to the mirror to get a better look at his face. He pulled at the skin under his left eye, where Ruben's fist had connected in a knockout blow. Not even the slightest scratch or discoloration. He leaned in closer still, wondering why it seemed like he couldn't get a better angle of sight on his reflection.

"I guess it could be adrenaline," Jackie said. "But I feel like it's more than that. I feel like something inside me wants to jump out and grab hold of something."

"Let me see that diamond you found," Joseph said to Kevin.

Kevin pulled the crystal from his pocket. "I don't think it's a diamond," he said.

"There's a way we can find out," Joseph said. He opened his hand, revealing a silver tube in his palm.

"What's that?" Kevin asked.

"An ultraviolet light pen," Joseph said. "I just stole it from Jackie's room."

"Good thinking," Jackie said. "We can test it."

"Test it for what?" Kevin said.

"Watch," said Jackie. She turned off the bathroom light.

Joseph took the crystal from Kevin and held the silver tube against the crystal's widest face. He pressed a button on the tube, turning on the ultraviolet light.

"What in the world?" said Kevin.

The crystal was glowing bright purple, so bright that it lit up the entire bathroom.

"Is it supposed to do this?" asked Joseph.

"It's supposed to fluoresce," said Jackie. "Trace minerals inside are supposed to glow, but it's not supposed to do this."

"What does it mean?" Kevin asked.

"Either it's not a diamond, or it's the most valuable diamond on earth," said Jackie.

"If we could find more of these, we'd be rich," said Joseph. "Imagine if light bulbs were made out of this stone. Everyone's energy bill would plummet."

"It would cost a lot more than a household energy bill to make every light bulb out of diamonds, or even crystals," said Jackie.

"Well I'm sure there's some money-making application for this," said Joseph. "I guarantee you this is why someone blasted open the mountain. There are more of these inside."

They oohed and aahed over the crystal for awhile, each taking turns investigating the power of its glow. When she'd seen enough, Jackie turned on the light. The crystal made its way back to Kevin and he put it in his pocket. He returned to the mirror to further investigate the miracle healing on his face.

"Is there something strange about this mirror?" Kevin asked.

"What do you mean?" said Joseph.

"It's like, no matter how close I get to it, I can't get a better view."

"Let me see." Joseph stepped next to Kevin and the two of them leaned in and out, watching their own reflections grow larger and smaller.

"Weird," Joseph said.

"Weird is right," said Jackie. "I wish you two could see yourselves."

"We're weird? You're the one who wants to jump out of your skin and grab something," Joseph said.

"It's not that it's a bad view," said Kevin. "It's just strange."

"Hang on," Joseph said, "I don't think it's the mirror. I think--"

Joseph grabbed a hair brush from the bathroom counter and held it close to his eyes.

"You guys don't feel it?" said Jackie.

"Feel what?" said Kevin.

"Like something inside of you really wants to come out."

"I don't," said Kevin, now watching Joseph wave the brush forward and back in front of his face.

"It's us!" Joseph shouted. "It's our eyes! Kevin, the mirror is fine. Our eyesight is so sharp that when you look in the mirror, you can see just as much detail from far away as you can when you get in close."

Kevin looked in the mirror again, focusing on the skin just underneath his left eye. He focused carefully. Even though his face was more than a foot away from the mirror, he could see all the pores in the skin -- he could see inside the pores. Focusing his eyes, he could see a tiny speck of dirt, hidden at the base of a tiny hair follicle, half folded in a wrinkle under his eye.

"Wild," he said. "Jackie, you've got to try this."

"Hang on," said Jackie.

"No, seriously Jackie, try this," said Joseph, who was now turning the hairbrush around in his hands, carefully inspecting every inch.

"It's like my eyes are adjustable binoculars," Kevin said.

The sink came on with a blast, and Kevin jumped in surprise.

"W'oh! I didn't even see you turn that on," he said to Joseph.

"I didn't," said Joseph, looking at the sink, puzzled.

"It was me," said Jackie. "I made the water come on. I was thinking about it, and it happened. Watch, let me do it again."



Jackie looked at the sink intently. The water turned itself off.

"Now that's just freaky," Joseph said.

There was a click behind Kevin's head. He turned to see the door of the storage pantry sliding open, as if pulled by an invisible hand.

"Please say you're doing that too," said Kevin.

"I am! It's me!" said Jackie. "I can make things happen by thinking about them. I just willed it to happen. This feeling I've had – that's what it is. It's like I can reach out with my mind – like my eyes, my hands. It's like I'm seeing pictures I can control with my mind. Watch, let me try something else."

Jackie focused her gaze on the now open pantry so keenly that Kevin and Joseph stepped aside just to be out of her line of sight. As Jackie stared, a bottle of aspirin on the shelf did a wobbling, bouncing dance, then it floated out of the closet and across the bathroom.

"Jackie, this is nuts," said Joseph, as the aspirin bottle drifted in front of his face.

Kevin watched Jackie. Her eyes were focused on the aspirin, like they were pulling it through the air. When it was close to her she reached up to grab it.

"No, wait," said Kevin. "Let's see what more you can do. Can you make it float down the hall?"

"Okay," said Jackie in a voice one might use to respond to a dare. Stepping back into the hall, she made the aspirin coast out of the bathroom.

"Follow me, guys," she said.

Jackie paced behind the aspirin bottle, keeping it aloft a few feet in front of her. She led the group down the hall, through the living room, through the dining room, and into the kitchen.

"Take it outside," said Joseph.

"Alright," said Jackie.

"I'll open the door," said Kevin.

"No. I want to try something."

With the aspirin still floating in front of her, Jackie stopped in the middle of the kitchen. The door unlocked itself and swung open.

"Unbelievable," Joseph said.

They followed her outside.

"Now what?" said Jackie.

"How high can you make it go?" said Kevin.

Jackie tilted her head, and the aspirin floated upward with the gentle grace of a soap bubble.

"Do you think someone will see it?" said Joseph.

"Don't worry about it," said Kevin. "Just see how high you can make it go."

They watched the aspirin soar above the power lines, a fading white speck in the sky.

"Faster," said Kevin.

The aspirin accelerated from soap bubble to rocket. Kevin lost track of it.

"Where is it?" said Joseph.

"I can't see it anymore," said Jackie. "I'm not sure what's happening to it."

Kevin thought about what this meant. If Jackie could move objects with her mind, if they could run faster than jackrabbits, if they could leap over tall, barbed wire fences...

And what about that sound in his ears? It had been with him all afternoon now. He imagined the conversation he might need to have later, the question he'd sworn never to ask. "Dad, what does the hum sound like?"

He needed to get the thought from his mind. He focused on a basketball lying against the side of the house. He imagined it floating into the air. He willed it to move, trying to push it with his thoughts. Nothing happened.

"I see it!" shouted Joseph.

"I do too," said Jackie. "I've got it in my control again."

Above them, the aspirin bottle made a graceful descent. Jackie brought it to rest in a soft landing on Kevin's head.

They laughed together. Kevin thrust his head upward, tossing the aspirin bottle into the air. Without ever seeing it, he knew right where it was. He could literally hear it falling through the air. He stretched his foot out behind him and tapped the aspirin bottle with his heel. It bounced up and over his shoulder, where he caught it with one hand.

"That was awesome," said Joseph. "Do they have a soccer team at your school? You could be the superstar player."

Kevin smiled at the thought.

"You know, that's not a bad idea," he said. "But I wouldn't try out for soccer. The sport everyone cares about at my school is basketball."

"We have a hoop," said Jackie. "We should play."

They convened on the side of the house, under the hoop. Jackie bounce-passed the basketball to Kevin. Holding it in his hands, feeling the worn nubs of rubber with his fingertips, he could see it arcing through the air. He knew exactly where to aim, how much force to apply. He tossed the ball at the basket as if he were releasing a dove into the sky. He needed only give it a nudge. The rest took care of itself.

Swish.

Jackie and Joseph took turns.

Swish. Swish.

They played two-on-one, one-on-one, one-on-two....they made layups and skyhooks and behind-the-back-off-the-board-nothing-but-net miracles. They dunked. Three white kids playing in the driveway of a "McMansion," taking turns in a slam dunk contest. It was marvelously ridiculous. Joseph in particular was amazing. It seemed he could launch from any point in the driveway and do a three-sixty slam dunk beauty that would turn heads in Madison Square Garden. Kevin could hear the roar of the crowd.

Or was that the hum?

Kevin grunted.

"What's wrong?" said Jackie.

"Nothing," said Kevin. He tossed the ball at the basket. *Clang*.

"Ha!" shouted Joseph as he caught the rebound. "The first miss of the day! Hey guys, watch this."

Joseph dropped the ball to his foot, and with force that made Kevin cringe to watch, Joseph punted the basketball, like he was trying to send it to the moon.

It popped. Not with a crack, like a balloon, but with a thud, like a watermelon, and the dead, flat remains of the basketball drifted through the air, having moved only a few feet.

"Nice going," Jackie said with a smirk.

For one more magical hour they played with their new abilities. It was a dream of unlimited discovery. Running, jumping, lifting, kicking, flipping, throwing, hearing, seeing, even smelling – in every way they interacted with the world around them, they found themselves able to do it better. Just minutes before Joseph and Jackie's mother came home, Joseph said the words that Kevin had been thinking from the start.

"It's like we're superheroes now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Joseph and Jackie's mother was a tall, slim woman with the same dark brown hair as her children. She came through the front door of the house holding a grocery sack and a travel cup from The Global Mug Coffee Shop.

"Hello, I don't believe I know you," she said to Kevin in a voice that immediately put him at ease. How simple it was for an adult to speak to him as an equal. His mind drifted to his dad's circle of friends, how they treated him like an annoying little kid, one of them more so than the others.

"This is Kevin Browne," said Jackie. "We met him today at Blackstone Park."

"Brown and Silver," said Jackie's mom. "How cute."

Kevin must have betrayed his confusion with his face.

"Our last name," Jackie explained to him, "Silver."

"Indeed," said Jackie's mom. "I'm Sharon Silver, and it's very nice to meet you."

"His dad is Benjamin Browne," said Jackie.

"No kidding," said Mrs. Silver. "Well please pass on my admiration to your father. I love his work. In fact, I've got my eye on a sculpture I saw in Santa Fe last weekend. The little girl under the umbrella."

Kevin nodded. He remembered that sculpture. It was the first one completed after his mom died.

"Are you new in town?" Mrs. Silver asked. "I haven't seen you around."

"He's not a homeschooler, Mom," said Jackie.

"I was just out..." said Kevin.

"Out?" said Mrs. Silver.

"Of class," said Kevin.

As the ridiculous words left his lips, they took a chunk of the afternoon's bliss with them. At some point soon, he would have to face the reality that he had ditched his first day of high school and he might be in trouble for it.

"I see. Well, I'll be inside watching the news. Big day today. Have you all heard?"

"Heard about what?" said Joseph.

"There was an explosion on Turquoise Mountain."

Silence.

"Maybe you'd like to come into the den with me and take a look?" said Mrs. Silver.

"Yes, we'll do that," said Jackie.

*For those just joining us, an explosion rocked through Turquoise this afternoon shortly after one o'clock. Investigators on the scene aren't certain of the cause, and at this point are reluctant to speculate.*

Joseph, Jackie, and Kevin crammed together on the sofa. When the newscast cut to a reporter on the scene, at the familiar spot on Turquoise Mountain, the hole in the mountainside looking just as they'd left it, Kevin could feel Jackie's body tighten up.

*Tom, I'm live at the site of the explosion, where criminal investigators and the state geological office have to share space. Both crews are looking over the scene right now because neither can say definitively that they are the ones who belong. At present it is unclear whether today's explosion was an act of vandalism, or an unexpected geological event. Both sides of the investigation can agree on one thing. They have never seen anything like this.*

"Of course it's vandalism," said Mrs. Silver. "Turquoise Mountain isn't a volcano, but it is sacred to so many people in this town. Someone wanted attention, and they're getting it."

Kevin put his hand over the crystal in his pocket.

*The first police officers to arrive on the scene saw three young people fleeing the area. Police are describing them as two boys and one girl between the ages of twelve and fifteen. At present, these are the only suspects in this incident.*

"You kids weren't up at Turquoise Mountain today, were you?" said Mrs. Silver, a smile on her face.

"No, Mom. We were at Blackstone Park, remember?" said Joseph.

For just an instant, the television went silent as the newscast cut to a commercial, and in that silence, Kevin was reminded of the buzz in his ears.

"You know what," he said, "I think I'd better get going. My dad doesn't know I'm here and I don't want to worry him."

"I'm sure your dad will appreciate your thoughtfulness," said Mrs. Silver. "Let me give you a ride. I'll grab my coat."

They waited for Mrs. Silver to leave the room before bursting into whispers. “We’re suspects!” said Jackie.

“We’ll be fine,” said Joseph

“But what if we’re not?” said Jackie. “Maybe we should go to the police before they come to us.”

“We didn’t do anything wrong, and we don’t know anything that can help the police,” said Kevin.

Jackie didn’t look convinced. She went to a computer desk in the corner of the room and grabbed a scrap of paper.

“Here’s my cell and email,” she said to Kevin. “Give me yours. We should check in again tonight. Watch the news when you get home. And call us if anything strange happens.”

“That’s right, Kevin, anything strange,” repeated Joseph with a grin on his face. “It’s been such a perfectly normal day, after all.”

## Chapter 5

The evening after Kevin and his dad spread the ashes on the tree at Turquoise Mountain, there was a reception at Kevin’s house. Family, friends, and others, mostly people Kevin didn’t know, gathered in small, shifting groups and spoke quietly. Nearly every woman in the house wanted to give Kevin a hug. He was told four times that night that he was “so brave.”

But The Hearers mostly left him alone.

People in Turquoise don’t choose to become Hearers, it just happens to them, and once it happens to a person, he is a Hearer for life.

Hearers hear the hum. The Turquoise Hum is its proper name. It’s a low, resonant, sometimes rumbling noise. The hum has been described as the sound of a diesel engine, an opera singer, a barber’s razor, a harmonica, a violin and a washing machine. Hearers claim the The Turquoise Hum is only present in full within Turquoise city limits, but it can call to a Hearer from anywhere in the world.

That’s what happened to Kevin’s dad. Benjamin Browne was born to a wealthy family in Boston. He was an odd child, not interested in games or toys. As he grew older, his family attributed his unusual behavior to his artistic talent. When he turned eighteen, he hit the road and drove across the country to Turquoise.

He didn’t know he was going to Turquoise specifically, and he didn’t use a map. He just knew he had to go somewhere, and kept going until he found it. The hum had called him.

All of this was reported to Kevin by his mother. Kevin and his dad rarely spoke of these things.

The hum parsed Turquoise into three groups: those who believed the hum was something special, something mystical even; those who believed the hum was some phenomenon caused by radio waves emitted from The Dunce Cap atop the mountain; and those who thought it was all a bunch of rubbish.

Kevin was in the last group. His parents were both in the first.

Kevin’s mother was born and raised in Turquoise. She knew of the hum. She knew that people came to town from all over the world because they were called by it. She knew the mountain had something to do with it. She believed in the significance of the hum, even though she couldn’t hear it herself.

She helped Kevin’s dad connect with other Hearers. A group of them met every Monday night at Kevin’s house. Craig Hoffman, Jacob and Joyce Medina, and Cassandra D’Antonia. Five adults, all seemingly normal people, gathering in Kevin’s living room once a week to be crazy together.

They were all so weird about Turquoise Mountain. They didn’t want to be too near to it. They didn’t want to be too far from it. They had to arrange their chairs at specific and changing angles in relationship to it. Sometimes they stood on the porch, all evening, staring at it.

“The hum and the mountain are deeply intertwined,” his dad said one night as he and Kevin sat on the porch looking at the mountain. “Every Hearer will tell you so.”

“But you’re sure it’s not The Dunce Cap?”

"I'm sure. The hum is so much more than some sound you hear. It's inside my head. It's telling me something. Signals from The Dunces Cap couldn't do that, unless your old man is just a giant radio."

His dad laughed. Kevin didn't.

"Maybe we should move somewhere else," Kevin said.

"I can't leave," said his dad.

Hearers had a thing for crystals. At every Monday meeting, the group laid crystals of various sizes, shapes, and colors across the coffee table and discussed their "chakras." Jacob and Joyce Medina hung crystals under every doorway in their house and from the rearview mirror in their car. Craig Hoffman owned a shop on the south end of town, where he used crystals, incense, and candles to "heal" people.

Thankfully, Kevin's dad kept only one crystal in the house. It was small, and he wore it in a pendant around his neck. The crystal was a present, given to him shortly after Kevin was born. Kevin's mom had found it on Turquoise Mountain.

Kevin remembered feeling skeptical about his dad's beliefs from an early age. Jokes about the Hearers were a regular part of schoolyard play in elementary school. In fifth grade, Kevin's teacher tried to give a lesson about the history of The Turquoise Hum, but stopped when the snickers from the back rows grew into a classroom-wide teasing session directed at Kevin and his dad.

At home, Kevin's mom carefully balanced the needs of her husband with the needs of her son. Kevin didn't fully appreciate these efforts until after she died. Without his mother there, Kevin was the one who had to listen to his dad speak about "balancing his chi." Sometimes his dad worried openly about Kevin's "aura." One night Kevin's dad announced he was becoming a "vegan."

"No animal products. No meat, no eggs, no cheese," his dad declared. "You can still eat McDonald's if you want. But I'm done with it."

So Kevin and his dad began eating separate meals. His dad cooked elaborate concoctions of vegetables and tofu, all while the Tingley 2000 churned and burped (Kevin found it odd that his dad was willing to give up all meat, eggs, milk, and cheese, but could not give up his beloved espresso), and Kevin rode his bike three blocks to Turquoise Good Luck Restaurant for carryout Moo Goo Gai Pan or Kung Pao Chicken.

One night Cassandra D'Antonia told Kevin she saw "a disturbance in his energy body" and Kevin decided he'd had enough. That night he said some things to Cassandra and his dad that he later regretted. But at least the Hearers knew to leave him alone.

Hum became a dirty word in the house. Neither Kevin nor his dad spoke of it in the other's presence. Whenever The Hearers came over, Kevin went to his room, or left the house altogether.

But on this night, after Kevin said thank you and goodbye to Mrs. Silver and prepared himself to leave the afternoon fantasy of butterfly chases and superhero abilities, a persistent buzz/ring/melody/hum...yes, hum, still in his ears, a crystal still in his pocket, all his certainty about his dad and the Hearers was gone.

His newly acute hearing picked up the Hearers' conversation on the other side of his front door before he opened it, and for the first time, Kevin gave serious consideration to how hard daily life might be for these poor people.

He could hear Cassandra speak about a new art gallery in downtown Turquoise. She said she would be there all day tomorrow. Joyce asked if she could come too. Cassandra said no, that access tomorrow was by invitation only.

He could tell by their voices where they were sitting. Cassandra's voice was loud. She was sitting in the chair that faced the door. Joyce and Jacob's voices were soft. They were sitting on the couch, their backs to him. He could smell the espresso they were drinking. There were layers of it in the house. His dad had fired up the Tingley 2000 Home Barista for at least two rounds. He imagined them joking with Cassandra, who refused to drink espresso and called it "an infernal concoction that should be banned."

Kevin opened the door and took in a world of sound that should have been familiar, but wasn't. The second hand on the wall clock pounded like a sledgehammer, a sound that had always been there, but had never made itself known before. The floor lamp was no longer content to simply illuminate, it now had to spew forth an irksome electric whistle. His first step on the hardwood floor was a thunderclap. The

Hearers stood from the couch to greet him, and in so doing, unleashed a swirling cacophony of feet, joints, couch cushions, breathing, and heartbeats. In his own house, with his own expectations of what life should sound like, this new way of hearing threw him off-kilter. And the music remained in his ears, sliding around all these sounds, amplifying them as it became part of them. Seeing The Hearers, this odd group of middle-aged misfits whose entire lives were upended by something they heard, forced the question to a place in his mind where it could no longer be ignored. Could it be that I'm a Hearer too?

Could it be that, all this time, his dad wasn't crazy after all? Could it be that the hum was indeed "a higher state of sound, something that only exceptional people could hear," as his dad claimed? If the sap from the fallen elm had given Kevin enhanced strength, enhanced agility, enhanced sight, and enhanced hearing, and on top of all this, he now heard the hum...

"Where you been, Sport?" his dad said. With that question, Kevin knew his dad had been worried. His dad never called him 'Sport.'

"Sorry, I met up with some friends and lost track of time," Kevin said.

His dad smiled. Kevin expected that, were it not for the presence of the Hearers, his dad would be genuinely interested to know more. It wasn't like Kevin to meet up with friends after school and lose track of time.

"Well, good. Looks like you had fun."

Kevin nodded. Now there was awkwardness in the room. He wanted to leave.

"Were you playing football or something?" his dad continued.

Football? Kevin realized his shirt was still mud-stained from the morning fight with Ruben.

"No, I just took a spill," Kevin said.

"Boys will be boys," said Joyce Medina. Her comment was followed by long seconds of silence.

"How do you feel tonight, Kevin?" asked Craig.

How did he feel?

"Fine," said Kevin. "Why?"

Several more seconds of silence, broken when Joyce Medina put her hands over her face and began sobbing. Jacob put his arm around Joyce and kissed her head.

"You'll have to forgive us," said his dad. "There was an explosion at Turquoise Mountain. I know you don't want to talk about... what we hear..."

"Oh," said Kevin, suddenly feeling like he wanted to disappear into a corner. He had been so caught up in the crazy events of his own afternoon that he hadn't thought about what an explosion on Turquoise Mountain meant to the Hearers.

"We're going to eat some of Craig's famous tofu quiche," said Kevin's dad, forcing a smile. "You're welcome to join us."

"That's alright, thanks."

"I bought some frozen dinners too," his dad said.

Joyce Medina gurgled another sob into her hands. Kevin's eyes went in Joyce's direction, and on the way connected with Cassandra. The way she looked at him -- he felt terribly unwelcome in this group.

"I kind of wanted to talk to you about something," Kevin said to his dad.

"Oh...okay, sure Kevin."

Kevin ran a quick, condensed possible version of the next few minutes through his head. He and his dad would go somewhere else to find privacy in their own house, Kevin would tell his dad about a sound in his ears, his dad would get excited, he'd want to know more, Kevin would have a huge, outrageous story to tell -- would he talk about Turquoise Mountain? If he said too much, his dad might figure out that he and his friends were at the explosion site, that they were being mentioned as suspects on the news. And what about the crystal in his pocket?

"You know...not now. Maybe we can talk some other time," Kevin said.

"No, no," said his dad, "Now's a great time--"

"Some other time," said Kevin, already walking toward the stairs.

"Are you sure? I can come up in a few minutes if you'd like."

"It's cool. I'll be in my room."

As Kevin turned into the upstairs hallway, he heard Jacob Medina say, "Isn't adolescence fun?"

Out of habit, Kevin went to his bedroom, closed the door, and turned on his GameStation Console. All summer he had been playing a game called MegaDuck From Planet Xenon, and he was getting close to the final showdown with "King Sobbius" that would end the game. But as the game fired up, and the opening sequence rolled, showing a computer animated duck chasing a giant cobra through outer space, Kevin knew he didn't want to play. Somehow all the challenge was gone. Without even beginning a game, he knew that today he would make it to the end and defeat King Sobbius without any effort. All the pathways through MegaDuck's world were clear in his mind, and the hand-eye coordination necessary to maneuver MegaDuck past all the obstacles seemed like child's play.

He turned off the GameStation and sat silently on the foot of his bed, listening to the music.

"Listening to the hum," he corrected, in a whisper.

Kevin took a deep breath and exhaled sharply. He really wanted to talk to his dad. Why didn't he just do it? His dad had been more than willing. Kevin needed only step out of his room and call for his dad to come upstairs.

Unresolved years of detachment, anger, and confusion might be put behind them tonight. He just had to say the words. "Dad, I think I'm hearing the hum." He didn't need to tell him everything else about today. He could just start with the hum and see where it went.

"He's had a big day," said Cassandra, downstairs.

"Those first days of freshman year," said his dad, "they're so exciting. New friends, new classes..."

Their voices reminded Kevin of the night before. Cassandra had come over after Kevin went to bed. She and his dad stayed up late into the night talking about the hum. It irked Kevin that his dad was up late with this woman.

It irked Kevin how little his dad knew him. There were no new friends at school, just new enemies. Seniors who wanted to 'initiate' freshmen. Juniors who wanted to be seniors. Sophomores who were eager to assert that they were no longer at the bottom of the ladder.

Ruben was a sophomore.

"I think it's bigger than that," said Cassandra.

"I know what you're talking about. I heard it too," said Kevin's dad.

He wondered how often they talked about him. He wondered if he'd catch them saying something bad about him, something they'd regret saying if they knew his ears were like spy satellites now, able to pick up every word.

"I could hear it when he came in," Cassandra continued. "He was a completely different person."

*Then why didn't you say something? You just stared at me, you didn't even say hello!*

Cassandra was always such a phony, smiley and nice, eager to be friends, but determined to speak with him like he was a little kid. Kevin sometimes imagined himself shouting 'You are not my mother!' at Cassandra, just to see how she reacted.

She was the plainest, most boring person he had ever met. She never had anything interesting to say, she had no personality, she didn't do her hair, she didn't wear makeup, she wore the same plain black sweater every day.

"It was his aura," Cassandra said. "Kevin's aura was glowing like the sun."

"I heard a change too," said Kevin's dad. "I wonder if it's just puberty."

"No," said Cassandra. "It's more. It's one of the healthiest auras I've ever encountered. You should find out what happened to him today, Benjamin. Auras don't change like that without some sort of cleansing event. Something has been troubling your boy, and today he's found peace. I'm certain he has become connected in a big way."

Kevin sat frozen. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. All this time he had thought Cassandra was either crazy or full of it. But if there ever was a day that Kevin's 'aura' had changed, it was today.

The buzz in his ears grew more prominent.

"I don't hear anything different," said Craig Hoffman.

"Benjamin and I are hearing more than other Hearers, we think," said Cassandra. "We discussed this last night."

"I'd like to hear less," said Joyce Medina. The group laughed.

"I bet if we could convince him to sit quietly and just listen, Kevin might hear the hum tonight," said Cassandra.

"Well, I don't think we should bother him," said Kevin's dad. "If he's meant to hear it, he'll hear it in his own good time, and he can come to us. I'm not going to press the issue with him. The poor kid already thinks his old man is crazy."

*No, Dad. I don't think you're crazy. Not anymore.*

Why was he thinking these things to himself and leaving his dad out there to speculate? If his dad had been right...

If his dad had been right all these years, Kevin owed him an apology.

The phone rang. Kevin stood up to answer it, but at the same time, his cell phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Jackie. Thinking his dad could answer the land line, Kevin answered his cell.

"You left your backpack at the park," Jackie said. "I went back and got it."

"Thanks," Kevin said.

"If it's alright with you, Joseph and I will come over and drop if off," Jackie said.

"That would be great," Kevin said.

He ended the call, relieved for the excuse to put off speaking with his dad. He'd talk about the hum some other time. Maybe later tonight, after everyone left.

A tap on the bedroom door.

"Kevin, that was the high school on the phone," said his dad. The door opened and his dad gingerly poked his head inside. "Did you miss a class today?"

Kevin felt a groundswell of panic inside him. His mind raced through all the things he might say, and all the things that might happen.

It took only a second for him to see the ends of all the paths. If he lied now, odds were good his dad would find out later. The school was calling. The school had a record of his attendance.

And why lie about ditching? It wasn't like he was cutting class to go smoke dope or something. He had been in a fight. He had lost.

He had been to his mom's place.

He would tell his dad the truth. Just not all of it.

"I was in a fight, Dad."

His dad pushed his neck out, like he didn't hear what Kevin said. His face went blank with confusion.

"A kid named Ruben punched me in the stomach," Kevin continued. He had now let a lie into the conversation. Ruben had kicked Kevin in the stomach, but only after Kevin was already on the ground, having been floored by the punch to his face. But he couldn't tell his dad about the punch to his face without telling him why any evidence of that punch was now gone.

"Are you alright? Were you in the nurse's office? Is that why you missed class?"

Before Kevin had even processed the first question, his body reminded him that he was more than alright. Just the thought made him aware that a current of lively energy was inside him, waiting to be tapped. If he wanted to, he could jump up and touch the ceiling.

"I'm alright, and I never went to the nurse's office. I didn't even tell a teacher. I left."

"You left?"

"Dad, I lost. There was a crowd of people who watched, and when I lost, none of them stopped to help me."

"So you just left school? Where did you go?"

"I went to Blackstone Park. I met some people there. Joseph and Jackie Silver. They're homeschooled. They're coming over in just a few minutes because I left my backpack behind."

Kevin's dad nodded. Several times he opened his mouth to speak, but was unable to say anything. Finally he settled on, "Are you sure you're alright?"



"I'm fine, Dad. Thanks."

"So, who did you get in a fight with?"

The doorbell rang.

"That's probably them," Kevin said.

"Can we talk about this again later?" his dad asked.

"Yes, I'd like that."

Kevin left his dad standing in the bedroom.

Downstairs, Joseph and Jackie were already inside. Cassandra had let them in.

When Jackie spotted Kevin, she held up his backpack for him to see. He smiled at her. It was funny how little his new friends understood how things worked for regular kids. If he hadn't already confessed to his dad about ditching today, their appearance with his backpack would have rattled him out.

"We can't stay – we're headed to a party tonight. My mom's outside waiting," she said, and handed him his backpack. As she put the backpack in his hands, she leaned in close and whispered. "We need to talk and Joseph says it isn't safe to talk on the phone."

"Not safe to talk on the phone?"

"Shh!" Jackie hissed. "Can you walk us out to our car? I'll tell you on the way."

Kevin threw his backpack down next to the couch.

"Hello, I'm Benjamin Browne," said Kevin's dad, extending his hand to Jackie. Kevin could read the confusion on his dad's face. The poor guy had no idea how to handle the news Kevin gave him. Were these good kids who took care of his son after he lost a fight, or bad kids who encouraged him to ditch class? It was kind of fun to let his dad think he might be hanging with a crowd of rebels.

As Jackie shook hands with Kevin's dad, Cassandra said, "Would you children like to stay and have something to eat? Craig has made an interesting dish this evening."

Kevin tried to contain his disdain. He wanted to snap at Cassandra, tell her this wasn't her house, that offers to stay were the privilege of Kevin and his dad only.

"No, but thank you," said Jackie. "We only came to drop off Kevin's bag."

"Well, Kevin, how did you and your backpack get separated?" Cassandra asked.

"Long story," Kevin said, and quickly turned to Jackie. "I'll walk you out."

As soon as the front door was closed behind them, Joseph began whispering excitedly.

"I was listening to the police band on my short wave radio," Joseph said. "This afternoon they were talking about getting attendance records of every high school and middle school in the area. They're going to interview everyone who missed class and doesn't have a locktight alibi."

"I'm scared, Kevin," said Jackie. "If they pull you out for questioning, the men who saw us might recognize you. They'll think we were responsible for the explosion."

"But we weren't," Kevin said. "Doesn't the truth count for anything?"

"The truth?" Joseph said. Kevin knew what he was getting at. The truth involved eating sap from a fallen tree and jumping over six-foot fences. The truth didn't absolve them from the explosion at Turquoise Mountain, and presented a whole new set of problems.

Mrs. Silver honked her horn.

"We need to go," Jackie said to Joseph.

"But what are we going to do?" Kevin said, knowing the real question was what am I going to do? There were no school attendance records on Jackie and Joseph.

The front door opened. Cassandra stepped out.

"You kids still here?" She looked past them to the minivan parked at the curb, and smiled like a co-conspirator. "How long are you going to make your mother wait?"

Kevin opened his mouth to let Cassandra have it. Who did she think she was speaking to his friends like this? He took in a sharp breath in preparation to speak, but he stopped. Something was in the air, something that irritated his throat and froze him in place.

"We're just leaving," said Jackie.

"Well, have a good night," said Cassandra.

They waited for Cassandra to pass, saying nothing until she reached her truck.

“She drives that Mountain Ranger?” Joseph whispered.

Mrs. Silver honked again.

“Just a second!” Joseph yelled. Cassandra got into her truck and closed the door. “Did you guys--”

“Yes!” said Jackie. “Kevin did you smell it?”

“I did,” said Kevin. “I took in a big breath of it. It was her.”

Kevin hadn’t noticed it before, because, as was always the case, the inside of his house reeked of the espresso Kevin’s dad always made on his Tingley 2000. But when he had inhaled as Cassandra passed, his lungs and his nose took him back to the afternoon’s adventure. Fumes. Light and hidden, masked inside the smells of perfume, soap, and a house of espresso, but present. The same fumes they had found on Turquoise Mountain at the site of the explosion.

“It was her!” said Joseph. “That woman, Cassandra. She was at Turquoise Mountain today!”

“Who is she?” Jackie said.

“A long-time friend of my dad’s,” said Kevin, “and it doesn’t make any sense. She’s just a sad, strange Hearer. The Hearers don’t like to go to Turquoise Mountain.”

“That’s right!” said Joseph. “The Hearers are weird about the mountain, aren’t they? Maybe she cracked and tried to blow it up! She’d be able to get up there with that Mountain Ranger. Those things can climb a tree if you need them to. Did you know there were only fifty ever made?”

“Not now, Joseph,” said Jackie.

Kevin thought about Joyce Medina, sobbing uncontrollably.

“I don’t know,” said Kevin. “They all were pretty torn up about the explosion, actually.”

“Either way, we need to find out more about that woman,” said Joseph. “They’re going to recognize you, Kevin, and if we don’t have any other leads to give them, we’re all in trouble.”

Mrs. Silver rolled down her window.

“My lasagna’s getting cold!” she yelled.

“Okay, Mom!” said Joseph.

“Do you want to come to a party, Kevin?” Jackie asked.

“Yes, that will give us a chance to talk some more,” said Joseph. “You should come.”

“What party?” Kevin asked.

“It’s the first day of the school year,” Jackie said. “Our homeschool group gets together, and, well, we kind of celebrate that we don’t have to go back to school. There’s a bunch of people our age, Kevin. You’ll have fun.”

Kevin considered. It wasn’t often that he was invited to parties. Twenty-four hours ago, this was all he wanted for his first day of high school – new friends, adventures, party invites...

That was before his ears started buzzing.

“It sounds awesome,” Kevin said, “but I really need to talk to my dad tonight.”

“Alright,” said Jackie, clearly disappointed. “Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow?”

“That would be great.”

Mrs. Silver sat on her horn for a good three seconds.

They said goodnight, and Kevin watched them leave. He stood on the front porch for a minute, thinking and listening. He wished they hadn’t gone to the explosion site. Being seen by the cops was the only blight on an otherwise fabulous afternoon.

The front door opened and Jacob, Joyce, and Craig filed out, saying goodnight to Kevin as they left. When he went back inside, he would have his dad all to himself. There would be no excuse not to tell him.

## **The Letter to Julius Adams**

Dear Julius,

I write to report my life and health. Reports of my death are inaccurate. It is true that a scorpion stung me and brought me as near to death as one may safely approach, yet here I remain.

I have completed my study of termites in the Americas, and have a souvenir to show for it. These fascinating creatures will dig deep into the ground in search of water. Sometimes they unearth trace minerals of valuable deposits far beneath the surface. The natives look for diamond mines by looking at termite mounds, because many mounds have small diamonds scattered across their surfaces, diamonds that the termites have brought up from the deep.

I have one such diamond in my pocket. I found it on the side of a very unusual mountain. I look forward to the day when I may show it to you.

I have much work yet to do here, and will write again soon.

Peter Gerrard

## Chapter 6

A familiar voice greeted Kevin when he stepped in the house.

*Tom, investigators have now closed all of state route 150 up to Turquoise Mountain and are treating this entire area as a crime scene...*

"So what do you think about the explosion on the mountain?" his dad asked.

Kevin thought carefully before he answered. At some point, he needed to commit to the same story about his afternoon that would be told to all parties. He hated lying to his dad. Maybe if he told brief, incomplete versions of the truth he wouldn't end up contradicting himself later.

Kevin sat next to his dad on the couch

"I don't know," he said.

"Your mother would have had a strong opinion on this," said Kevin's dad. "It's funny, in the last years of her life, she was the one with strange hangups about Turquoise Mountain. But I doubt you want to hear about all this."

"No, Dad, I do," said Kevin. "What would Mom have said?"

"Your mother thought there was a network of caves underneath the whole city," said Kevin's dad. "There is no record of underground caves in Turquoise, but all those Peter Gerrard people thought they existed."

With his voice, Kevin's dad dismissed the "Peter Gerrard People" the same way others might dismiss The Hearers.

"I don't know exactly what she would have said, but I do know that by the end of her life, she was a bona fide expert on Turquoise Mountain. Look at that picture on the TV. That hole in the mountain goes deeper than you or I can see. Maybe someone else thought like your mother, and blasted open the mountain to find Peter Gerrard's mystery caves. Or whatever. I have my own theories about all this."

"What are your theories, Dad?"

Kevin's dad took a deep breath, rolled his head around his shoulders.

"We're all hearing it," he said. "Craig, Joyce, Cassandra... we knew exactly when it happened. Even though we didn't hear the actual explosion, we heard it in the hum."

"Was it a change? What you heard in the hum?"

Kevin's dad was clearly surprised at this interest in the topic. On any other day, the mere mention of the hum would have sent Kevin from the room.

"Yes, it changed," said his dad. "It was like a shockwave ripped through the hum, and the sound hasn't been quite the same since."

Kevin nodded his head but said nothing. He was struggling for the words that might open this conversation.

‘Dad, I think I’m hearing it too.’ Or maybe, ‘Dad, what would you say if I told you I might be one of you now?’

It all sounded terrible in his mind. It all led him down a treacherous path with an invisible end; admitting he had been wrong all this time, telling his dad the truth about today, telling him that he had visited Mom’s place.

“I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear about all this,” his dad said.

“No, no, it’s fine--”

“It’s not fine. I don’t need to be wrapping you up in my world. You’ve got your own life to live.”

*Authorities are offering a thousand dollar reward for information leading to the capture of anyone responsible for today’s explosion, that is, if anyone is indeed responsible. Geologists from the university are still considering a natural cause...*

“Turquoise is full of surprises,” said Kevin’s dad. “But I guess that’s true of anyplace, really. I think I’m ready to turn in. Do you want to see any more of this?”

“No, I think I’ve seen enough.”

His dad turned off the TV and stood up. He stretched his arms and yawned, then he stood and waited for Kevin to say something.

Kevin froze. His mind jumped from the urgency of getting his thoughts out in the open to the discomfort of speaking frankly with his father to the realization that he didn’t have it in him, that he would let this moment pass whether he wanted to or not.

“Have a good night,” said his dad.

“You too.”

His dad rounded the bend in the stairs, and the opportunity was gone.

Kevin squeezed his hands into fists and banged them on his knees. Why hadn’t he spoken up? He had turned down an invite to a party so he could stay home and speak with his dad, and he didn’t have the guts to do it.

“Stupid, stupid,” Kevin hissed to the open air.

For a few minutes, Kevin sat in what should have been silence, but even a quiet living room was full of sounds, and those sounds had other sounds attached to them, sounds that blended on top and inside of each other, and soon enough, an empty living room was a crowded, noisy place.

*We knew exactly when it happened...we heard it in the hum.*

Kevin wandered backwards through the day in his mind. They chased a butterfly. They lopped up sap like kids at a chocolate fountain. A tree went toppling over. He felt a vibration in its trunk. What was that vibration? How come Jackie and Joseph hadn’t felt it?

He had been so disappointed to see them at the park when he got there, but now he was thrilled to have new friends who’d shared the day’s events. More so than his black eye or his sore stomach, more than the embarrassment of losing a fight in front of everyone, what really hurt Kevin, what drove him to ditch his first day of high school, was loneliness. When the fight was over, and no one stopped to help him, to even acknowledge him...

At some point after his mom’s death, Kevin began a downward slide in the social circles at school, landing at the very bottom of the popularity ranking when he started sixth grade at Turquoise Middle School. It was weird. In fifth grade, he could talk to people like Gabe Penderbom and Ricky Narvaiz; in sixth grade they wanted nothing to do with him. It was as if there was a covert operation to segregate the class into cool and uncool that summer between fifth and sixth grade.

Kevin imagined all the kids who would become popular in sixth grade going to a dark, smoky room for a secret meeting. In that room, the kids open a yearbook and decide who’s in and who’s out. They come to Kevin’s yearbook picture and examine his frizzy hair and pale skin; they make a decision and pronouncement. “Geek” is stamped in red across Kevin’s yearbook glossy and they move on to the next kid. Kevin’s social life is over.

He wasn't the only one, of course. Maxine Waters and Bill Brannon got it even worse than he did. Hunter Smith didn't fare well on the playground either. The four of them hung out, not because they liked each other, but because they had no other choice.

He had hoped high school would be different. New faces, older students, new teachers – same old story. Ruben Graves was a year older than Kevin, and while they knew each other's names (at least Kevin knew Ruben's name), they didn't know each other.

Kevin had no idea why Ruben decided to attack him. Kevin was walking through the courtyard, minding his own business, heading to fourth period, just like everyone else, and Ruben threw a rock at him. It collided with the back of Kevin's skull like a cue ball breaking a billiard rack, making a loud thunk inside his ears that jarred him out of place and nearly knocked him over.

Instant dizziness. Amidst the spinning he heard laughter. It was awful, superior laughter -- something Kevin had heard before. It was the pointed sound of someone laughing at him.

Now, replaying the scene in his memory, he was sure that Vicky Baca was laughing the loudest.

Kevin had tried to walk away, but Ruben threw another rock, this one thumping against his backpack. When he stopped and turned around, Ruben said, "Oh no, Freshman. You just keep on walking."

"I'm going this way," Kevin said, pointing in the opposite direction. It was away from the math building, in a direction that made no sense, but it was also away from this disaster in the making. A crowd formed around him. They were all against him. They all wanted to see him get beat up.

If he met Ruben again tomorrow, he would make up for all of this.

"You were going that way, Freshman," Ruben had said. "You just keep going."

"No. I'm going this way," Kevin insisted, and he began walking to one side, thinking he would just have to push his way through the crowd.

Ruben took three running steps to block Kevin's path. "You'll do what I tell you to do, Freshman."

Ruben pushed Kevin in the chest with both hands. It was a light push, meant more to provoke than to cause harm.

What Kevin did next was the one bright spot in this ugly memory. What he did wasn't planned. Maybe he did it out of instinct. Maybe he did it as a last desperate effort to save his first day of high school. Maybe he did it because he was tired, having been kept up late in the night by the sound of his dad and Cassandra talking downstairs. Maybe he did it because Vicky Baca was laughing at him.

Kevin balled his right hand into a fist and punched Ruben in the face. It was a solid punch that took Ruben by surprise and knocked him back a few steps. If only Kevin could do it over again, this is the point where he would make some changes. Had he taken action at this point, had he followed up his successful punch with another, even if he had turned and run after the punch—

No, I can't change a thing, or the entire magical afternoon might not have happened.

Instead of attacking or running away, Kevin stood in place, watching Ruben stumble and regain his feet, practically waiting for the return blow. Ruben righted himself and charged. He leveled Kevin with one knockout punch to the face. Kevin landed in a puddle, and Ruben kicked him in the stomach after he was down.

For a few seconds Kevin couldn't breathe, and he wondered if he was in trouble. He wondered if the next step was an ambulance, or a coffin. When he was able to take his first cleansing, life-giving breath, more of a gasp but still full of air, he felt a rush. From fear of death to an odd elation at life, all in a few seconds, all of it co-existing with tremendous pain, that time on the ground had all the character of a horrible nightmare.

But it got worse. Worse than the sting of a punch to the face, worse than the shock of a swift kick to the gut, worse than the uncertainty of his health, the fear of permanent damage -- the worst memory of all was when they left him there to rot. Kevin was splayed on the gravel like roadkill, maybe near death for all they knew, and the entire crowd abandoned him. They walked over and around him, some of them hurriedly, some of them as if he wasn't there, and within twenty seconds, he was alone. The bell rang, signaling the start of fourth period, and Kevin was alone in the courtyard, beaten and bloody.

So he got up and left. Best decision he ever made.

All the events from that point onward were the result of that one act of defiance.

*I left. I didn't go to the nurse's office. I didn't tell a teacher. I didn't go to fourth period, or fifth, or sixth...I just left.*

*Tomorrow I'll return, and things will be different.*

He let his mind replay the best parts of the afternoon with Jackie and Joseph yet again, and eventually he fell asleep on the couch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kevin dreamed about a basketball game. In the dream, Kevin played point guard for Turquoise High School, and was phenomenal. There was a catch: he had to wear a disguise.

The disguise was a present from a magic monkey who spoke in sign language. The disguise was a simple basketball uniform, but when Kevin wore it no one could recognize him.

The disguise made him a star. Every jump shot was nothing but net; every lay-up was full of grace. He could steal the ball from anyone on the court at any time, and whenever he did, the crowd went crazy. They adored him.

But they didn't know who he was. His mom was in the crowd. She said, "I barely recognize you, Kevin."

*"I barely recognize you."*

Her voice was a flute, the sound of it fluttering through the silent darkness. The dream moved to Johnny's Barber Shop in downtown Turquoise. He was a little kid. Johnny was cutting Kevin's hair so short that his mother said, "I barely recognize you, Kevin."

A radio was blaring. Johnny's radio was always tuned to loud, crass announcers who said frightening things about world governments, surprising things about Texas not really being a state, and strange, passionate things about global conspiracies played out in the world of diet soda.

Today the announcer was going on about some mystery woman.

*...the daughter of a poor family in Shuberville, Mississippi, her father was absent and her mother was a criminal. Her home was a den for drug addicts and thieves. She escaped abject poverty, but she never escaped her past. When she was a teenager, she cracked. She went on a killing spree, then fled Mississippi and changed her name.*

There was static on the radio, a resonant hum that lay just underneath the announcer's shrill voice.

*The police aren't looking for her. She was never charged with murder. Everyone who might know of this girl's awful deeds, from the neighbors to her teachers, her grandparents and friends, the police, the judge, the jury, they all disappeared. Anyone who ever knew her, then anyone who even knew her name, disappeared...*

Kevin's mom paid for the haircut with a ten dollar bill. Johnny gave her five ones as change. He kept the cash register drawer open, waiting for a tip.

*My mentor, the late, great, Buzz Tingley, was onto it all, and was prepared to go public with the complete story. Countless people murdered and the truth never discovered! Then Buzz disappeared too.*

Kevin's mom gave two dollars back to Johnny.

*So today I bring this story to the world for the first time. This story is a mind-blower, and I must ask for your trust as we cover some strange terrain together. My friends, I present to you the story of The Demon Queen of Shuberville..*

The radio lost its signal and went to noisy static. Johnny looked at his radio with disappointment.

"Johnny, why do you listen to this nonsense?" said Kevin's mom.

"Oh, I don't think it's nonsense, Mrs. Browne," Johnny said as he fiddled with the radio dial, tweaking it to the left and right, trying without success to bring back his program. "That man is a genius. I trust every word he says."

"Who was that announcer?"

"Why, Mrs. Browne, that's Lou Sweeney."

Kevin half woke up, the radio static from his dream still ringing in his ears. He glanced at the clock on the TV. 5:31 am. He drifted back to sleep, hoping to re-visit the dream in Johnny's Barber Shop. It was so nice to see his mom.

His mind didn't go back to the memory. Instead, in a half-awake, half-asleep state, he saw disturbing images of bugs. The tree stump in Blackstone Park, the termites – they weren't going into the holes, they were coming out. More and more of them, flowing out like lava from a volcano. Volcano.... I wonder if all this time, Turquoise Mountain has been a volcano...an explosion, a cave, animal tracks....termites again...Kevin reached into his pocket and pulled out the crystal they found on the mountain....he put the crystal on top of the termite flow, and it sank, slowly. A millimeter at a time, it sank into the termites, into the tree stump, until it was fully submerged and all that was before him was a flowing surface of legs, jaws, antennae, billowing out of the tree stump, funneling in one direction, eventually becoming a single-file line of scurrying bugs.

### A Tragic Cycle of Short Lives and Fast Deaths

A single-file line of scurrying bugs. Nothing was more beautiful to eleven-year-old Gretchen Brinkley.

They moved through the alley behind the apartment with precision, an odor trail of pheromones holding the line together, telling each ant exactly where to go.

They moved with grace, the line behaving like a snake, curving around leaves and over twigs in a perfect game of follow the leader.

They moved as a unit. To Gretchen, this was the most beautiful part. The fire ants in this line weren't choosing to obey the pheromones. They were enslaved. The colony chose this path. Scouts laid the pheromone trail, and hundreds upon hundreds of ants had no choice but to follow the scent.

Precision, grace, and beauty were all linked to that crucial fact, expressed neatly in one sentence of *Treasury of Insects* by Tristan Nelson III: "The pheromone response is obligatory." Gretchen had read every other book in the Shuberville Public Library only once, but she had read *Treasury of Insects* three times.

"This is a book for boys," Ms. Stephenson had said. "But I've held it for you." She presented the new book to Gretchen with the reverence it deserved. "It's just been published. It's the first book in the Shuberville Library with color pictures. You should be the first to read it."

Gretchen would have read *Treasury of Insects* twenty times more, but three was all it took. The book was now burned in her memory. She could close her eyes, choose any page, and see every word.

No one knew Gretchen had such a perfect memory, not even her mom.

No one knew that Gretchen could solve any math problem in her head in a matter of milliseconds. The hypotenuse of a right triangle with 5-inch and 6-inch sides? Seven point eight one zero two four nine six seven five nine. Three hundred forty eight times one thousand nine hundred twenty? Six hundred sixty eight thousand one hundred sixty.

The amount of time it took her mom to crash into a lamp after Ken Childress struck her in the face? Zero point nine one seconds. Not that she had been counting when it happened. She was sitting in her room in the dark, listening to them fight. Her perfect memory saved it for her. A scream. A slap. Point-nine-one seconds. A crash.

She knew where the ants were going. There were only two expeditions that brought out so much of the fire ant colony: a move to a new location, or an attack. The line of ants ended with an over-sized soldier. The queen was still buried deep underground. This day's expedition was war.

The pheromone response is obligatory.

Hundreds of ant soldiers would die on this day. They knew it, and they didn't hesitate. It was their purpose. They had grown old. They needed to get out of the way. There were new, young larvae growing

to take their place. The war would not only bring back food for these young larvae, but would also remove the oldest, slowest soldiers from the mix of mouths to be fed.

The target was now in sight. A rotten tree stump at the end of the alley, a mountain of treasure about to be looted. The opposition knew an attack was coming. Gretchen could hear the defenders lining up, filling the open corridors, anticipating the paths the invaders would take.

A crack in the side of the stump served as the main gate to this fortress. A giant set of jaws met the first ant soldier and snapped it in two. An information wave flowed down the line of ants, and they moved with new purpose and vigor, their march no longer methodical and precise, but angry and violent.

The first defender exposed his entire head. Five times as large as any ant, this defender was an impressive beast who should have been impassable. But he was far out-numbered, and in seconds, the defender termite was brought to the ground and swarmed, a mighty buffalo felled by a pack of raving jackals.

The ants stormed into the tree stump, and Gretchen closed her eyes. This was the most magical part. She leaned down and pressed her ear to the top of the stump. She listened.

No one knew that Gretchen heard things. With every soundwave that touched her eardrums, Gretchen heard not only the sound itself, but all the implications of that sound. The implications resonated on the outer edges of the sound, blending into a music that followed Gretchen wherever she went. When she closed her eyes and truly listened, the music told her so much more than her eyes could see.

She heard the music of war inside the tree stump. She heard the collision of two singular organisms, expressed as hundreds of individual units, fighting to the death. It was a dance, purposeful and precise. With every step, termites and ants met their respective ends, a crescendo of death that would reach its climax when the line of ants broke through the outer defenses and stole into the nest itself.

It was beautiful when it happened. The balance of power shifting entirely to one side, and the music of war making a sudden transition to the music of death. Deep in the nest, hundreds of worker termites, smaller and weaker than their soldier brethren, were now exposed to the oncoming horde, and were slaughtered. A tingling flowed from the music through her body, connecting her to the sound at hundreds of tiny points on her arms and legs.

The exodus began. A second line of ants moved opposite the first, one line of traffic going in; one going out. Every ant that lived through this battle would walk out with a dead termite in its jaws. The termite meat would nourish the larvae back at the mound.

And the termite nest would continue. The ants had demolished the soldier class, but stolen only a fraction of the colony's thousands of workers. The ants did this on purpose. They were farmers, and the termites were their crop. They left enough to ensure the termite nest would re-grow, and be ready for the next raid, the next harvest.

"A tragic cycle of short lives and fast deaths," is what Tristan Nelson called the ant-termite relationship in *Treasury of Insects*. He didn't get it. His color pictures of ants and termites engaged in battle showed the drama of individual insects, but the beauty of the ant mound was its oneness. Thousands of workers, hundreds of soldiers, living for a purpose larger than themselves, dying for the sake of the one colony.

When the last ant went under the earth, Gretchen left the alley and returned to the grim reality of her own life. But the music of war stayed with her.

## Chapter 7

Kevin found himself on the living room couch a little after five in the morning, his cell phone buzzing with a call from Jackie.

"Hello."

"Joseph can fly."

"What?"



"I know it sounds crazy -- I guess it isn't any crazier than everything else that's happened lately, but it's true. I heard him open his bedroom window in the middle of the night. I went in to see what he was doing and he was gone. I called him on his cell, he said I wouldn't believe where he was. Ten minutes later he was floating down from the sky and landing on the window ledge."

Kevin wondered if this was just another vivid dream to top off a night full of them. His brain might be replaying Joseph's jump over the fence from the day before and concocting a strange scene for him, where he gets a phone call from Jackie before sunrise.

"That's amazing," Kevin said.

"There's more," said Jackie. "Joseph says he found the tracks again, just north of Turquoise Mountain."

"The tracks?"

"Yes, the animal tracks we found yesterday on the mountain. Joseph says they go through the forest and stop at a red brick house in the middle of nowhere."

A red brick house? Kevin sat up. This definitely wasn't a dream. Despite the jarring, early-morning wake up call, he felt awake and alert.

"Where was this house?" Kevin asked.

"Way up north, hidden in the forest under the mountain. Joseph said there weren't any real roads around it. Just a path dug out by someone's tires."

"That's Cassandra's house," Kevin said.

"That's what Joseph thought"

"How did he know?" Kevin asked.

"He said it would take a truck like hers to get over all the mud up there. I told him he was jumping to conclusions too quickly, but I guess he was right. I suppose she could have ridden horseback to the top of the mountain, but those didn't look like horseprints. Maybe she uses unusual horse shoes."

"Jackie, you don't want to spend today following more tracks, do you?" Kevin was amused. Jackie had the power to move objects with her mind, her brother apparently now had the ability to fly, and she wanted to spend the day looking at animal tracks.

"We need somewhere to start, Kevin. We need to figure out what happened at the mountain yesterday before the police link us to the explosion. This Cassandra woman is involved somehow. This is our best lead."

"I don't--" He wanted to say he didn't see why the police were such a big deal. They hadn't done anything wrong. But he didn't want to argue. He was interested in where this was going. "Are you suggesting I ditch school today to hang out with you again?"

"Of course I am! If you go to school today, the police will want to interview you. If we figure out what happened first, and we get proof, we're off the hook."

Kevin thought about Ruben, about a rematch. How sweet it would be to set that right.

But would it be sweet enough? The day before had been unlike anything he had ever experienced. One amazing adventure after another. What might they find today?

"You've got to admit, Kevin -- she smelled like those fumes on the mountain. Now there are these unusual tracks from her house to the explosion site. Something weird is going on with your dad's friend. We should check it out."

"Okay," said Kevin. "Where are we meeting?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A month after Kevin's mom died, his dad bought a Tingley 2000 espresso machine from a downtown coffee hangout named The Global Mug.

"Everyone's buying these," his dad said. "Espresso is such a classy drink. It's like coffee, but more sophisticated. We need a little sophistication in this house now that it's just us guys. Don't you think?"

"I don't care. I've never had espresso before."

“You’re gonna love it. Let’s whip up a batch.”

Kevin most certainly did not love it. He found the drink to be pungent and bitter. Still, grinding coffee beans, burping steampuffs, and random, coffee-nerd messages like “How Have You Bean?” on the unit’s comically large digital display screen became part of the morning routine at Kevin’s house.

On this morning, the Tingley’s display screen read, “Take a Break From Your Daily Grind.”

“If you say so,” Kevin said, patting the Tingley 2000 like a dog and thinking about the day ahead.

He left the house at a quarter past seven, like he would on any normal school day. But when he should have turned on Jefferson, instead he ducked into the alley and began a sprint through the back roads of town, ending behind Mission Church, where he found Joseph and Jackie waiting. Over the back wall, into the open field, and they were on the same route they had taken the day before. When they were far enough into the open to be certain no one was listening, Kevin asked about Joseph’s night.

“After we got home last night I went into the backyard, just to screw around – see what I could do with these new powers,” Joseph said.

“I cleaned my room last night without ever touching a thing,” Jackie interjected.

“Me first,” Joseph said.

“Sorry,” Jackie whispered, hiding a smile with her hand.

“I was thinking about how when we followed that butterfly, it was so easy to jump that tall fence,” Joseph said. “I decided to really test my jumping ability. I jumped from the lawn to the roof of our neighbor’s garage without any trouble. It was so crazy – I hope no one saw me. I jumped down and did it again. And every time I did it, I felt like I could jump even higher if I wanted to. So, from the middle of the lawn, I thought about jumping up as high as I could go, bent my knees, and did it. And I didn’t just jump high, I jumped really high! Over a tree, over my house -- I thought I was going to zoom into space and fly away. So I tried to make myself stop, and it worked! I just stopped there, hanging over my own house like a helicopter. Then I thought about going down, and that worked too. It’s like a new way to move.”

Joseph stopped walking and looked around to make sure no one could see them.

“I try to go up, and I go up,” Joseph said, floating off the ground as he spoke. He stopped a few feet in the air, like a balloon on an invisible tether. Kevin and Jackie laughed with giddy excitement. The ability to fly – Kevin couldn’t imagine anything better.

“I try to go down, and I go down,” said Joseph, coasting back to the earth and landing on his tiptoes.

“Later, after everyone went to bed, I opened my window and jumped out,” Joseph continued. He floated a few inches off the ground again. “And then I ...flew!” As he shouted the word, he took off like a rocket, going twenty feet into the air, bringing a shriek of excitement from his sister.

Joseph came back down for another gentle landing. “Then I flew over the neighborhood,” he said. “I landed on Mr. Altamira’s roof, I jumped from there to the Young’s house and landed on their roof. I flew back to my house and came back in through the window. No one had even noticed I was gone.”

They started walking again, Joseph leading them, walking backwards, waving his hands as he spoke.

“Of course I couldn’t go to sleep, so a little later I got up and flew out the window again. This time I flew all the way to the library and landed on that roof. I flew from the library to a tall tree across the street. I landed on a high branch and looked at everything. I could see the moon and the stars, it was quiet.”

Joseph didn’t mention a sound filling his ears even when it was quiet outside. Surely he or Jackie would have noticed by now if they were hearing it too.

“Then I flew straight up,” Joseph continued. “I jumped out of the tree and went as high as I could go before I freaked out. I came back down and landed on the roof of the library, then I went up again. I kept doing that. Going up, getting scared, coming down, and after a few tries, I felt confident enough to go really, really high. I went up until I couldn’t see anything on the ground anymore, and even though I was scared, I kept going up, and before I knew it, I was close to a cloud. I kept going, keeping my eyes on that cloud, and then I plunged right into it. It was crazy! I was inside a cloud! It was like fog all around

me for just a second and then I came out on top. I stopped, and just floated above the cloud for a minute. The city, the mountains, the whole world was beneath me. It was unbelievable! I floated back down slowly, and, I'm not kidding, going slowly, it took like ten minutes to get down to the roof of the library."

"That long descent was when I called him," Jackie said.

Joseph laughed. "That was awesome. Middle of the night, high in the sky, and my cell phone rang! When I saw it was Jackie, I answered it. It was hysterical. I was having a phone conversation while I was floating over downtown."

"I'm jealous," said Kevin. "Last night I just fell asleep on the couch."

"Did you have strange dreams?" asked Jackie. "I did."

"Yes, I did," said Kevin. "Really vivid, memorable dreams."

"I think our brains must be ramped up," said Jackie. "My dreams were one after another, and I can remember them all. There was one where I was driving in a car race, and another where my hair grew so fast I had to keep cutting it, and one where I turned into a butterfly."

"I bet you loved that one," said Joseph.

"It was amazing! I didn't want to wake up."

Jackie was beaming at the memory.

"That's awesome," said Kevin, thinking that one of his dreams had a nice moment too. "My mom was in one of my dreams. It was a real memory. I had forgotten about it until the dream. It was kind of nice to see her."

"So it was a good memory?" said Jackie.

"I guess so. I was a little kid. I was getting my hair cut. Your guy, Joseph, Lou Sweeney – he was on the radio, and he was going on about some woman and some place called Shuberville."

"Are you serious?" said Joseph. "You heard that broadcast live when it happened?"

"What, was it a good one?" Kevin asked.

"A good one? It's only the most important, legendary radio broadcast in history!"

Joseph had a look on his face like he'd just been told the secret of life. These were a funny pair – Jackie and her animal tracks, Joseph and his radio announcer. Kevin thought about when he had tried to play Megaduck the day before, and how lame it had seemed. He wished that he had something he cared about so much that it was still interesting even in the face of exploding mountains, butterfly chases, and super powers.

"What was so important about it?" Kevin asked.

"It was the last broadcast he ever did on national radio!" Joseph said. "The Demon Queen has been chasing him ever since! At least, that's what some people think."

"Some people – you're one of them, Joseph," said Jackie.

"Well, I don't know. All I know is he's gone, and there are people on the Internet who say The Demon Queen is responsible. They say she doesn't like being called out by name, and comes to get anyone who speaks about her."

"If you think this all sounds like a ghost story you'd tell around a campfire, you're right," Jackie said to Kevin.

"I'm just saying it's what some people think," said Joseph. "All I know for sure is that Lou went off the air half-way through that broadcast, and no one's heard from him since."

"I remember the words Demon Queen of Shuberville," said Kevin. "What was he talking about?"

"Oh boy, here we go," said Jackie.

"Seriously, Jackie you've got to admit it doesn't sound so strange after what's happened to us now, does it?" said Joseph.

"I'll give you that," said Jackie. "If Lou Sweeney said he ate the sap from an elm tree and could fly--"

"You wouldn't believe him. You'd call him that Crazy Fart on the radio. But it's true! You have to admit it! All this time, it's been true."

"I don't know if I have to admit anything," said Jackie. "I still think Lou Sweeney's a crazy fart. Come on, Joseph -- the way he used to get all worked up..."

“Not used to, Jackie. He’s only in hiding, and will make a return to radio someday, as soon as it’s safe,” said Joseph. “At least, that’s what some people believe.”

“First things first,” said Jackie. “Like what happened at Turquoise Mountain yesterday. We need to figure that out before the police show up at Kevin’s house.”

As they continued walking toward the mountain, Kevin learned all he’d ever want to know about Lou Sweeney, starting from his early days in fringe talk radio and going through the final broadcast. Jackie, growing bored with this conversation, began playing games with the rocks far in front of them. Using the same powers that allowed her to send an aspirin bottle into the sky, she made rocks float from the ground and dance in the air, creating the effect of popcorn popping in the grass ahead of them.

“You can see why some people might find this to sound a little wacko,” she said.

Kevin smiled. “In my dream, the radio broadcast did suddenly go off the air,” he said.

“That’s right,” said Joseph. “His last words were ‘The Demon Queen of Shuberville.’”

“Yeah,” said Kevin. “They were.”

“Don’t get excited you two,” said Jackie. “Have you ever thought that this is all a hoax, meant to generate interest in a has-been radio announcer?”

“You don’t have to insult Lou,” said Joseph.

“I’m not listening to this anymore,” said Jackie. “You’ll have to forgive my brother. He’s really a smart guy, he just gets so taken up in this Lou Sweeney stuff. I’m ready to talk about something else. Did you have any other interesting dreams?”

Kevin thought about the magic monkey, the basketball uniform, the adoring crowd. He had tried out once for basketball in middle school, and was cut on the first day.

“What are you smiling about?” Jackie said. “You did have another dream. What was it?”

“Nothing worth mentioning,” said Kevin. “I’m just happy, I guess.”

“Alright, but I think you had another interesting dream and I want to hear about it later,” said Jackie. She opened her phone and began clicking around on the Internet.

“I did some research last night on the response of elm trees to termite infestation. There are a couple of really strange things about what happened yesterday.”

“A couple?” said Joseph.

“Okay, a lot, but more than even we know. For instance, the sap inside that elm tree shouldn’t have been sweet, it should have been stinky and gross. When elms are fighting off infestation, the sap turns rotten, especially when the tree is sick, and that tree was sick. Here, look at this.”

She held her phone so Joseph and Kevin could see the screen. It showed a map of the United States, with the bottom right half of it shaded red. Kevin’s eyes drifted to the top of New Mexico, which was pink.

“This map shows the places where tree-eating termites live,” she said. “Look, their concentration in Turquoise is so light – it’s highly unusual that we saw them at all.”

“Maybe we saw the first case. Those maps can be outdated,” said Joseph. “Insects are always moving.”

“I know. I think we witnessed a brand new phenomenon yesterday. I think it was the first time the tree-eating termite attacked and killed a New Mexico elm, and I think that the wild result, which has never happened before, is that the elm produces this delicious, amazing sap.”

“Sounds sensible enough,” said Kevin.

“It doesn’t explain anything, though,” said Joseph.

“But maybe it does if it’s a new occurrence. Maybe this sap, which no one has ever tried before, has amazing nutritional value. Maybe it’s so good for you that it opens up all this hidden potential of the human body.”

“Too convenient,” said Joseph, shaking his head.

“We’ll see who’s right when we get to the bottom of all of this,” said Jackie. “Speaking of which, are we going to walk the whole way?”

“I’m not,” said Joseph, with a mischievous grin. He took two running steps and leaped, at first flying forward like the greatest long jumper in history, only to take off right at the point where gravity

should have pulled him back down. Watching Joseph soar into the blue sky was breathtaking, but also a little frightening. There was so much open space above him. Kevin hoped he didn't go too high.

Joseph did a feet over head flip, like a swimmer in a giant pool, and came back down to where Jackie and Kevin stood.

"I saw our footprints from yesterday," Joseph said. "I have an idea."

"A rare occurrence indeed," said Jackie.

"Ha ha ha," said Joseph. "Seriously, I was thinking -- if we can lift heavy cellar doors, why can't I lift you two into the sky?"

"Oh boy, this oughta be good," said Jackie.

"Grab my wrist, Kevin," Joseph said extending his arm, "and then grab onto Jackie's so we form a chain. Just grab her, she'll never have the guts to do this of her own free will."

Jackie gently took Kevin's hand in hers.

"You underestimate me, Dear Brother," she said. "Just don't go too high."

The three of them now made a human chain with Kevin in the middle.

"Where's the fun in staying close to the ground," Joseph said with a smile.

Jackie pulled closer to Kevin and said, "I don't know if I want--"

Before she could protest any further, Joseph took off, and Kevin had the strange sensation he was holding onto a helium balloon, except that it kept climbing even after it pulled his arm taught.

The three friends were a mix of shrieks and laughter as they floated upward, and in a few seconds they were higher than the nearby trees with what seemed like the whole world beneath them.

## Chapter 8

They spoke very little as Joseph took them on a trek above the earth. What could they say that was more interesting than the landscape below? Green grass and sage became a miniature forest of wonders. Kevin's eyes caught a field mouse scurrying into a hole beneath a shrub, sending a grasshopper flitting on its way. He widened his view and understood that the mouse was running from a bird, a hawk that had narrowly missed in a divebomb attack. The hawk took off again, careful not to fly into their space, careful to leave this hunting ground to the strange new three-headed bird that owned the sky.

Even up here, in space Kevin was never meant to occupy, the hum followed, finding its way into the sound of the wind rushing past his ears. There was a noticeable change in the hum as they approached the mountain, like someone inside was singing in a booming voice that skipped the normal airways of sound and took a direct line into Kevin's head.

There were two songs, performed simultaneously. One called him close, made him want to reach inside and touch it. The other was ugly and frightening.

Two nights prior, Kevin's dad and Cassandra sat in the living room, talking well past midnight. Kevin had tried not to listen but he couldn't help himself. The next morning he was off for his first day of high school. He was nervous and couldn't sleep.

"It seems like the hum has been getting louder ever since Courtney died, but I'm the only one who notices," Kevin's dad had said.

"I'm sorry, Benjamin. I wish I could share your experience," said Cassandra, "but I don't. I haven't noticed a change."

"It's not a change so much as a clarity. It could be that there hasn't been a change at all, and I'm simply hearing it better."

"What do you hear?"

"I hear deep into the mountain. I hear both parts of it, like everyone, but I hear them so clearly now. The dark sounds are the same as ever, but the bright ones -- I feel like I can hear the bright sounds all the way down to their source. For years, I felt like I could hear the bright sounds just to a point. I always hit a wall. But today, I closed my eyes and listened -- now I can hear through that wall. What's weird is, on the

other side, the bright sounds are strong, incredibly strong, and they are tied to the dark sounds. Light and dark work in unison, one feeding the other.”

Normally, Kevin had no problem tuning out his dad, especially when the conversation was about the hum, but this conversation was different. Kevin’s dad was sharing an important personal detail with a woman, and that woman wasn’t Kevin’s mom.

Kevin had stared at the ceiling all night, stewing about how much he hated Cassandra. Now he was flying to her house to gather evidence that might link Cassandra to yesterday’s explosion. He was doing it to protect himself, but if this little escapade just happened to get Cassandra permanently out of his dad’s life, all the better.

“We should land before we get to her house,” Jackie said, “to make sure she doesn’t see us.”

“She’s not home,” said Kevin. “Last night she told the Hearers she would be at an art gallery all day today.”

“Perfect,” said Joseph. “We can land at her front door.”

“Let’s be careful, please,” said Jackie. “We’re trying to prove we aren’t criminals.”

Joseph brought them down in front of a small red-brick structure hidden in a nook between tree-covered hills.

“Does she actually live in this tiny place?” said Joseph. “I assumed from her truck that she was rich.”

“I don’t know much about her,” said Kevin. “My dad and I drove out here once to give her something. She didn’t invite us inside. My dad’s weird about being this close to the mountain.”

I am too, Kevin thought, but didn’t say.

Joseph pointed to a yellow decal on the back door of the small house. “This is an old bomb shelter. She owns a Mountain Ranger and lives in a bomb shelter. This is one interesting lady.”

Joseph went around to the side window and pressed his nose against the glass.

“What do you see in there?” asked Jackie.

“Do you think you can turn the lock so we can open the door?” Joseph said to Jackie.

“Yes, but I don’t know if I want to,” said Jackie. “That’s trespassing.”

“We’re already trespassing,” said Joseph. “Do you want to find proof that Cassandra blew up Turquoise Mountain or not?”

“We can’t just break into her house,” said Jackie.

“She and Kevin’s dad are friends. She won’t mind. Besides, I see some interesting stuff in there.”

“Like what?” said Jackie.

“Unlock the door and I’ll show you.”

“Fine,” said Jackie. She gazed through the window, and inside the house, the deadbolt on the front door unlocked.

“Shall I open the door for you as well, Sir?” Jackie said.

“Sure. It wouldn’t hurt to make sure there are no booby traps waiting for us.”

“See what I live with, Kevin? Booby traps. Good grief.”

But even as Jackie made fun of her brother, she did as he asked, using her powers to turn the knob and open the door.

“No alarms, no lasers, no buckets of water falling from the doorframe – I think you can go inside now,” said Jackie. “Only my brother would think there might be booby traps on the door.”

Joseph was already leading them inside, making a straight line to a bookcase in the back corner. The house was a crowded one-room space, with bookcases against every wall and a large circular table in the center of the room. Stacks of paper, some neatly arranged, others on the verge of tumbling, occupied the entire table.

“Yes, only I would have thought to look for booby traps my dear sister, but that’s because only I would have spotted this from afar and understood what it means about the occupant,” said Joseph. He pulled a book from the shelf and held it up for them to see. The title of the book was *Unafraid of the Truth: An Autobiography of Lou Sweeney*.

“Holy smokes, she’s one of you people,” said Jackie. “Now I see why you wanted in here so bad.”

“Mountain Ranger, Bomb Shelter, Lou Sweeney...I think I might be in love,” said Joseph.

“Hey look at this, she likes Peter Gerrard too,” said Jackie.

Kevin’s ears perked up, and he joined Jackie at a separate bookcase on the opposite wall. All three shelves of books were titles Kevin recognized from a different time in his life. The Origin of Insect Societies; Migrations and Manipulations: A Study of Birds and Butterflies; Life in the Anthill.

“This was our delivery the last time I was here,” he said. “All my mom’s Peter Gerrard books. Cassandra asked if she could have them.”

“Here’s something else that’s interesting,” Joseph announced from the other end of the room. He was holding up an old newspaper.

Kevin turned back to the shelves of Peter Gerrard books, not interested in whatever weirdness had caught Joseph’s attention now.

“Your mom liked Peter Gerrard?” said Jackie. “He died in Turquoise, you know.”

“I know,” said Kevin. “I’m guessing you like him too. Ants and butterflies and animal tracks – he’s right up your alley.”

“This is unbelievable,” Joseph murmured as he flipped through the pages of the yellowed newspaper.

“Yes, I think he’s interesting,” said Jackie. “He went crazy, you know.”

“My mom didn’t think so,” said Kevin. “She thought he only appeared crazy to people who don’t understand what he did.”

“Was your mom a professor or something?”

“No, she was just a normal person who became obsessed with Peter Gerrard. Part of it was that she loved the outdoors. At some point after I was born she just got all into it. She started hiking trails that he used to hike, observing all the bugs he used to study. One time she followed the migration of the Monarch butterfly from Canada to Mexico, just like Gerrard did.”

“And yesterday, there were so many butterflies at her place,” said Jackie.

“It was cool, wasn’t it?” said Kevin.

“Very cool,” said Jackie.

Seeing his mom’s old books, Kevin found his mind drifting to her other possessions. Most of them were gone now, donated to various universities and museums, but there were a few things left in his house, in a room she had used as a laboratory. There was a safe in the closet. Kevin had mostly forgotten about that safe. When he got home, he’d have to give it another look.

“You guys, there’s a door in the floor,” said Joseph.

“What?” said Jackie.

“A door. Come here!”

In the far corner of the room, Joseph had lifted a panel of the wood flooring and exposed a hidden stairwell going underneath the house.

“It’s huge down here,” said Joseph. “Told you it was an old bomb shelter.”

Jackie and Kevin followed Joseph down the stairs, which were steep and without a railing. The stairwell landed in an abnormally large sitting room, lavishly decorated. The walls were lined with artwork, much of it Kevin’s dad’s, all of it strange. There were twisted, unusual sculptures made of metal and marble, giant, abstract paintings on the walls, and a bubbling fountain in the corner with small trees and ferns growing around and out of it.

“You guys, what exactly are we doing here?” said Jackie. “I don’t feel comfortable sneaking around inside someone’s house.”

“It’s the best way to get to know someone,” said Joseph. “See how they live when they aren’t present and don’t know you’re coming.”

“You’re a freak,” said Jackie.

“Sticks and stones, Sissy. You know I’m right. This is the real Cassandra we’re looking at here.”

“Okay, so who is the real Cassandra then?” said Jackie. “I see the house of a wealthy person who likes art and for some reason wants to live underground.”

"That's just the surface," said Joseph. "You know what I see? I see someone who is content to leave the top room of her house, the part that people can see, an absolute mess, but keeps this hidden portion in spectacular shape. Just the opposite of how most people would do it."

"So she's weird," said Jackie. "I'll give you that. But how does that help us? You're not so normal yourself. Why are you carrying around that old newspaper?"

"This newspaper – oh, never mind. I don't want to argue with you right now. This newspaper's just a start. Who knows what other interesting things we'll find here? Let's see what else is behind the closed doors."

There were three doors on the back wall of the main room. One was open, leading to a small kitchen. The other two were closed. They approached slowly. "This one's just a bathroom," said Kevin, opening and closing the first door.

"But this one's a bedroom," said Joseph. "Jackpot!"

They followed Joseph into the bedroom and found him staring at a large painting, or maybe a drawing, on the wall opposite the bed. Kevin had a hard time deciding what it was they were looking at. Large and ornately framed, the picture was black and white with a murky but familiar image on it.

"The first thing she sees when she wakes up, and the last thing she sees at night," Joseph said. "A giant picture of Turquoise Mountain."

"Is it really Turquoise Mountain?" said Jackie. "It looks like something else."

"Of course it is," said Joseph. "It's a silhouette. The mountain is sketched in black against a white background. It's the perfect way to burn it into your head. This mountain probably haunts her in her sleep. Years upon years of looking at this creepy picture drove her mad and yesterday she blew up the mountain."

"See, I think it looks like a termite mound," said Jackie.

"A termite mound? No, Sis, I'm sure this is Turquoise Mountain. Take a good look at the mountain tonight at sunset – you'll see."

"I don't need to see. I know it looks like the mountain. I'm just saying -- the shape of this is also like a giant termite mound from South America."

"I think you've just got bugs on the brain. What do you think, Kevin?"

Kevin had drifted from their conversation. Something else had caught his eye. Next to Cassandra's bed was a bookcase. Kevin was inspecting the spines of the books, his mind racing with emotion and memory.

"Look at that, you've found more Peter Gerrard books," said Jackie. "She must be a real fanatic. I've never seen these books before."

"I have," said Kevin. He pulled one of the books from the top shelf. It was titled *A Study of the Evolution of the Social Insects*. He opened it. At the top of the inside front cover, written in pencil were two letters. CB.

Kevin brushed his finger across the letters. "Courtney Browne," he said quietly.

He didn't know why it bothered him so much. His mom's old books had been at Cassandra's house for a year now. Kevin stood up and tried to gather all the thoughts running through his mind. He couldn't turn them into anything coherent, and before he could stop himself, he slapped the top of the bookcase.

"W'oh, careful," said Joseph. "Gig's up if we break something."

"What's wrong Kevin?" asked Jackie.

"It's a long story," Kevin said. "Years of story. My life. I haven't told you about Cassandra and my dad, and me. Cassandra and I haven't ever really gotten along. I've always thought she was a little bit... odd."

"And you were right," said Joseph. "This woman's a nutjob."

"Hush, Joseph," said Jackie. "Why did you think she was odd, Kevin?"

"Lots of reasons. My dad..."

Kevin took a deep breath. He had spoken the truth about his dad to himself a thousand times. He hadn't breathed a word of it to another person since elementary school, when he learned the hard way that his peers at school were less than impressed with the Hearers.



"My dad is a Hearer."

Joseph's eyes lit up. "The Turquoise Hum?"

"Yes, the hum."

"That's awesome, Kevin," said Joseph. "I knew there was something about the hum in your life. Yesterday, every time it came up--"

"I know," said Kevin. "There's more. I think I may be hearing it too, starting yesterday, after we ate the sap."

"Seriously? Now that's interesting. You were holding out on us," said Joseph.

"We can talk about this later. I'm ready to leave," Kevin said.

"Okay, let's just make sure we get all the evidence we need," said Jackie. She pulled out her cell phone and used it to take a picture of the painting on the wall. "Would you like me to photo that newspaper, Joseph?"

"That's alright. I'm taking it with me," Joseph said.

"You're kidding, right?" said Jackie.

"She won't even notice it's gone, and if she does, she'll think she's lost it in the mess upstairs."

"Joseph, what's so special about that newspaper?" asked Jackie.

Joseph turned the paper so they could see its banner.

The Shuberville Tribune.

"Shuberville?" said Jackie.

"That's right," said Joseph. "Shuberville -- the very last word Lou Sweeney ever said on the radio. The greatest of all mysteries."

"The Demon Queen of Shuberville," Kevin said, echoing the words from his dream.

Joseph nodded, pleased that Kevin remembered.

"In his final broadcast, Lou called Shuberville a small town in Mississippi," said Joseph. "But no one knows where it is. It isn't on any maps. There is no historical record of it. People in Mississippi say Lou made it up."

"Can we talk about this later?" said Jackie. "If we're stealing things, I want to get out of here now."

"Let's go to your house," Kevin said. "I want to take another look at that safe-cracking book."

"Sticky Fingers?" said Joseph, intrigued. "What have you got in mind?"

"I'll explain on the way."

### **When It's Time, Someone Will Find You**

Lou Sweeney was an abnormal child trapped in a normal life. His parents were kind. His house was nice. His neighborhood was safe. His mind was bored. When Lou was eight, he stumbled upon The Buzz Tingley Radio Hour and lost himself in the magic of it. A far-away voice, deep and full of authority, saying the most amazing things, "Telling the truth in a world full of lies..." Lou fell in love with fringe radio before he even knew what it was.

On Lou's sixteenth birthday, with the help of his high school guidance counselor, he was allowed one hour of airtime on the radio station at the community college. His program, a strange, high-pitched imitation of The Buzz Tingley Radio Hour, broadcast at five in the morning, had no audience, but Lou didn't care. He went home with a tape recording of his broadcast. He mailed that recording to Buzz Tingley.

Two months later, he received a letter:

Dear Lou,

Thank you for sending me your radio broadcast. I found it engaging and entertaining. You have real potential. Even at an early age, you can see through the falsehoods presented to a sleeping society as reality.

Of late, I have spent much time in Southern Mississippi, where I am unearthing the greatest cover-up in modern history. I fear that my life will be in danger as soon as I go public with this story. I am telling you this because you can sense the truth, and some day the truth of what I am doing may be swept under the rug by powerful people who want to keep the masses silent. In a few weeks, I intend to tell the world via my radio broadcast about The Legend of The Demon Queen of Shuberville. If I am gone, and the world doesn't know, or doesn't believe, it will be up to you to finish telling the story.

The truth, wherever it takes us,

Buzz Tingley

The next Wednesday night Buzz was off the air, his program unceremoniously replaced with country western music.

Lou spent the remainder of his adolescence researching the whereabouts of Buzz Tingley and The Legend of the Demon Queen of Shuberville. He learned how to use a university library and he made important contacts in the radio industry, but he found no clues about what happened to his idol. By the time Lou broke into professional radio as a production assistant at KKBR in Houston, the same station that had once broadcast Buzz Tingley to the world, Buzz was not only gone, but forgotten. Lou asked people in the office if they knew what happened to Buzz. They didn't know who Lou was talking about. He looked for archival recordings of the Buzz Tingley radio show. There were none to be found. He tried to find records of Buzz's employment as an announcer for KKBR. There weren't any. He looked for Buzz's surviving family and found no one. By the time Lou began poking around Southern Mississippi on the weekends, he was looking for any evidence that Buzz Tingley had existed at all.

Over the years, Lou learned that no one in Mississippi had heard of Buzz Tingley either. But everyone had heard the legend.

In Jackson and Greenville, the kids treated it as a joke.

"You'd better shut your mouth, or the Demon Queen'll get you."

"I'm gonna hit the next pitch all the way to Shuberville."

"That girl is uglier than The Demon Queen of Shuberville."

"Be quiet!" their mothers would scold. "I don't wanna hear you talking anymore about Shuberville."

It was the generational divide that caught Lou's attention. It was like Santa Claus in reverse. The kids laughed it off, but the parents believed.

In the small towns, the legend was more serious business.

"Have you ever heard of a place called Shuberville?" Lou would ask.

Usually the answer was no. Usually the room would clear as soon as Lou asked the question.

In the township of Finlay, at Black Jack's Package Liquors & Tavern, Lou befriended an old cotton farmer. After three hours of beer drinking and conversation had passed, Lou asked the question.

The farmer's face went dark.

"I ain't never heard of Shuberville. You got that? I ain't never heard of it!"

Slamming his mug into the table, the farmer got up and left. The bartender told Lou to pay up and get out.

Over the years, Lou fell into a routine. He'd finish work at the radio station on Friday afternoon, drive through the night to Mississippi, spend the weekend trying to get people to talk, and drive back to Houston on Sunday. He developed a few important friendships in the Delta. George in Vicksburg. Abe in Greenville. Ned in Harristown.

It was Ned who gave him the break.

"Lou, some of us have been talking, in secret, and we've decided we'll help you find out about your missing radio announcer," Ned told him one afternoon on the front porch of the General Store.

"That's great," said Lou. "I'd really appreciate even the smallest--"

Ned held up his hand and looked around, as if spies were among them. "It's very important that you say nothing from this point forward."

"Okay," said Lou.

"Tomorrow night, go to Sanders Mill off Route 20. Follow the creek going south. Keep going. When it's time, someone will find you."

"Find me? Who's--"

"Shh..." Ned grabbed Lou on the shoulder. "You and I are gonna part ways now. As soon as you step off this porch, you and I never spoke, and I don't know who you are. You got that?"

Lou nodded.

"Good luck," said Ned. "And remember. You and I never spoke."

### **A Thousand Separate Bodies Working As One**

Gretchen Brinkley had no father. She had a grandfather, but he was in jail. Her grandmother was dead. She had no aunts or uncles, no cousins, no family friends.

That left only her mother. And Ken Childress.

Ken Childress was her mother's boyfriend. He was slime.

At seven, Gretchen understood that her mother had to lay down with slime to keep the bills paid. She knew her mother was broke, and that she allowed Ken Childress into their lives in exchange for money. She knew that Ken's money, pulled from his pockets in large wads, was stolen. She knew that some day her mother and Ken both would be in jail. She knew she was supposed to be too young to understand any of this.

At eight, Gretchen became aware that the hum in her ears wasn't heard by everyone. At nine, she realized that the hum was more than a sound, it was a connection to the world. At ten, she decided that her mother lied to her about the scars. Gretchen's arms and legs were covered with hundreds of tiny scars. Her mother said the scars were with Gretchen at birth, that the doctors called them birth marks.

The scars were Gretchen's connection points. They tingled. When she listened carefully, she could hear herself in the hum, and through the tingling of each scar, she could feel it. The hum resonated in her ears, and vibrated in her scars.

By her eleventh birthday, Gretchen had developed two overwhelming passions in her life: an obsession with bugs, and a hatred for Ken Childress. Gretchen's mother was housebound, afraid to go out of the apartment with her black eyes and bruised cheeks, and because she was housebound, she was dependent on Ken and his wads of cash. Gretchen hated her house, hated the prison of her life, so she stayed out all day and late into the night. She found bugs, she looked at them, she listened to them, she read about them at the Shuberville Public Library in their lone book on the subject: Treasury of Insects.

On Gretchen's twelfth birthday, Ms. Stephenson, the librarian, greeted her with a book wrapped in birthday paper. Gretchen tore it open to find a thick, hardbound textbook, hundreds of pages long: The Origin of Insect Societies: by Peter Gerrard.

"I got it from the University of Mississippi," Ms. Stephenson said. "This is a book for college students, but I don't think it's too hard for you."

"Thank you," Gretchen said.

"I have a son who's about your age," Ms. Stephenson said, "if you'd ever like to meet him."

"That's alright," said Gretchen.

"I know what it's like to live in a family without a father," Ms. Stephenson said. "Maybe some day we could talk."

"Thank you," said Gretchen. "But I'm fine. Thank you for the book. I really do appreciate it."

Gretchen read *The Origin of Insect Societies* cover to cover that afternoon. She fell in love with Peter Gerrard, a scientist long dead. The words and ideas and diagrams in *The Origin of Insect Societies* captured the magic of an anthill, the miracle of a termite mound – but beyond the words, Gretchen understood Gerrard’s implications. When he said, “The secrets of life itself lay within the bustling colony of ants, a thousand separate bodies working as one organism,” Gerrard wasn’t making a statement of fact, but a declaration of love.

Ms. Stephenson helped Gretchen learn more about Peter Gerrard and his works. She used inter-library lending programs to obtain more books about and by Peter Gerrard for Gretchen to read. She arranged to have Gretchen excused from classes at school, giving her more time at the library. On days when Gretchen stayed in the library from open to close, Ms. Stephenson made lunch for her. Gretchen became an expert on Peter Gerrard, knowing as much about him and his work as highly paid professors at prestigious universities.

As on her twelfth, Gretchen went to the library on her thirteenth birthday. As on her twelfth, Ms. Stephenson had a special present for Gretchen when she arrived.

“I can’t send you home with this present,” Ms. Stephenson said. “The agreement is that I keep it here in the library. I think you’ll understand.”

She handed Gretchen a framed document, an old piece of paper protected under glass, like a family portrait. Gretchen knew right away what it was.

“The Letter to Julius Adams,” she said, the sound of her own words getting lost in the swelling of the hum all around her.

“We get to keep this for one month,” Ms. Stephenson said. “I’m supposed to put it inside a glass case, and I will. I’m also supposed to take your picture with it, so if you don’t mind, please stand over there in front of the encyclopedias and hold the letter so we can see it.”

Gretchen did as she was told. Ms. Stephenson grabbed a camera from the bottom drawer of her desk and took Gretchen’s picture.

“I thought that today, while it’s just you and me,” Ms. Stephenson said, “we’d take it out of the frame, and give it a look.”

“I’d like that,” said Gretchen. Gerrard’s spiral doodles, surrounding the few words on the page, were swimming before Gretchen’s eyes.

Ms. Stephenson took the frame and loosened the wooden backing. With the care that it deserved, she removed the letter and handed it to Gretchen.

Gretchen’s fingertips grew warm where they touched the letter. Gretchen had read the words on this letter many times before. In all the books about Gerrard, the text of this letter was published. A picture of the actual letter was not.

The Letter to Julius Adams was considered important because it was Gerrard’s final communication with the world before he disappeared. The scholars thought the letter was significant in its triviality. Gerrard said nothing of note in the letter, except that he was alive. To many, the letter was another piece of evidence that before he died, Peter Gerrard went mad.

The scholars were wrong. They were wrong because they were looking for meaning in the wrong place. Gerrard had written the trivial letters, words, and sentences of this letter to mask its true message. Its true message was written in the spirals.

All along the edges of the paper, spiral doodles, neither decorative nor functional, covered the open space. These were Gerrard’s final message, and he had encoded it in a way that only someone like Gretchen, someone who heard, could understand it.

The spirals moved before her eyes like ocean waves, carrying Gretchen away from the present, away from her life in Shuberville, and into the world of Peter Gerrard, where the normal rules of reality didn’t apply, and a far-away mountain held a powerful secret.

## Chapter 9

Kevin was the last one out of Cassandra's house. As he closed the door behind him, he heard Jackie slide the deadbolt into place. After they stepped off the property and into the surrounding woods, Jackie made the mud shift and slide behind them to cover their footprints.

"My mom has a safe in her lab," Kevin said. "It's been locked shut ever since she died."

"Is that why we're going to get the Sticky Fingers book?" asked Joseph. "What happened – did you forget the combination?"

"I never knew the combination," said Kevin. "My dad didn't either."

The words came out with only a measure of anger, a welcome contrast to the fury this topic usually stirred in Kevin. For the first time in years, Kevin felt hopeful that he might finally learn what was inside his mom's safe.

After his mom died, Kevin found himself doing lots of adult things, things his dad couldn't manage alone. Closets had to be cleaned, books and biological specimens had to be boxed, letters had to be opened and answered, and all the while, Courtney Browne's safe, a small steel box with a combination lock on the door, sat in the closet, sealed shut. Kevin was hopeful that a slip of paper or an old computer file would turn up and give them the combination. Weeks went by. It was a Sunday afternoon when his patience ran out. He asked his dad to call a locksmith.

The next day a professional locksmith came to their house, and gave a grim prognosis.

"This is an unmarked Swiss Banking Grade Safe," the locksmith said, barely able to contain his admiration. "It's not meant to be opened by anyone who doesn't know the combination, even a licensed professional."

"What does that mean?" asked Kevin's dad. "You can't open it?"

"The locking mechanism inside this safe is surrounded by sound-reducing layers of rubber and lead. Even with my equipment, I won't be able to hear enough of what's happening in there to crack this. And supposing that I could, it would take days and days of work because the combination is six digits long. The only way this is getting opened is in an explosives lab."

"How much does that cost?" said Kevin's dad.

"What's inside this safe, if you don't mind me asking?" said the locksmith.

"We don't know," said Kevin's dad.

The locksmith laughed. "Explosives present a new problem. I recommend explosives if we know there are diamonds inside. Since you don't know the contents, we've got a problem. The walls of this safe are an inch thick and the lock is the best quality in the world. Explosives can blast it open, but unless you've got something solid in there, whatever's inside will break into a million pieces."

The locksmith left. The safe remained shut. Over the months, Kevin learned to forget. He quit looking at the safe. He tried not to think of it. He tried to move on.

They arrived at Jackie and Joseph's house just before noon, retrieved Safe Cracking For Fun and Profit from the bookshelf, and were back out the door, Kevin in the lead. On foot, Kevin's house should have been a half hour's travel. They ran, and covered the distance in a few minutes.

"The Lab" was still the name of the room that once belonged to Kevin's mom. Over the years, as her Peter Gerrard hobby turned into an obsession, Courtney Browne evolved from an outdoor enthusiast to an amateur scientist to a semi-professional scientist to a respected field researcher and expert on Peter Gerrard. The spare bedroom in Kevin's house evolved along with his mother, gathering more and more professional lab equipment over the years.

No scientific research had been performed in the room since the day she died, but the tools that made it a laboratory remained. Courtney Browne's workbench, a pocked and stained maple antique, was now an over-sized stand for her microscope. Her computer and its already out-of-date software hid on a small cart in the corner. The drafting table where she once captured all her ideas on paper was becoming Kevin's preferred place to do homework.

Kevin and Jackie now sat at that drafting table, Jackie surfing the Internet on her phone, Kevin immersing himself in the words of Sticky Fingers Smith.

*It's an act of love to put something in a safe. It's an act of love to crack a safe, too. Things are put into safes because the world wants them, and the owner doesn't want to share. In that sense, safe cracking is an equalizer.*

"When does he get to the part about how to open a safe?" Kevin said.

"Not until the end," said Joseph, who sat at the workbench, hunched over the microscope, for some reason having decided to put the stolen copy of The Shuberville Tribune underneath it.

Kevin flipped through the pages of the safe cracking book, stopping at the last chapter: "The Wheel Pack, The Fence, and Safe Cracking by Mathematical Deduction."

*Each number in a safe's combination corresponds to one wheel inside the locking mechanism. Each wheel has a groove cut into its side and a tab of metal sticking out from its face. When the combination dial hits one number in the combination, stops, and turns the other way, the metal tab grabs onto the next wheel in the locking mechanism. In a correctly dialed combination, all the wheels of the lock are spun in a precise manner such that the grooves on each wheel line up, creating an extended groove across the entire lock. A small metal bar above the wheels falls into this groove, and the door opens.*

"This sounds complicated," Kevin said.

"It gets worse," said Joseph.

"Here, let me see that," Jackie said, grabbing Safe Cracking for Fun and Profit. She skimmed the open pages of the book. "How hard can this be? We've got super sensitive hearing."

Jackie went to the closet and pressed her ear against the safe. She slowly turned the dial.

"I heard something!" she said. She pulled her head away to observe the number on the dial.

"Seventeen," she whispered.

Jackie pressed her ear against the safe again and began turning the dial the other way, stopping when she heard another click.

"How many numbers are in the combination?" she said.

"Six," said Kevin.

Six times Jackie stopped, leaned back, observed the number on the dial, and began turning the other way. After the sixth stop, she tried to open the door. It didn't budge.

"I knew it wouldn't be that easy," said Joseph, reaching for the safe cracking book. "I remember some long, horrible process with paper, pencil, and days of work." Joseph flipped a few pages and handed the book to Kevin.

*The sound of tab touching wheel is simultaneously the most exhilarating and exasperating sound in the world for the safe cracker. It is the sound of progress, one measly, infinitesimally tiny step at a time.*

Kevin took the book back to his mom's drafting table and read through to the end. With each successive page, his hopes of getting inside the safe drifted farther away. Sticky Fingers outlined a painstaking process of going number by number, listening carefully, and graphing a chart of number combinations that brought about clicks.

*A click can be a stopping and turning point, or it can be a miscellaneous collision between two tabs of metal that aren't going to connect. A well-designed safe takes advantage of the exponential growth of possible combinations that come with an increasing number of wheels in the locking mechanism. An experienced cracker can open a common three-digit safe in less than an hour. A good six-digit safe may take him a lifetime.*

Kevin looked up from the book to see Joseph listening to the safe and spinning the dial.

"I definitely hear the clicks," he said. "Come try this Kevin."

Kevin approached and pressed his ear to the steel door. It was warm where Joseph and Jackie had listened. He turned the dial.

"Click" wasn't enough of a word to describe what he heard. A clap, a scrape, a click, a twang, and a vibration, one after the other, the vibration resonating for seconds after the click – this was the sound inside the safe.

*The sound of tab touching wheel is simultaneously the most exhilarating and exasperating sound in the world...*

Kevin turned the sound into a mental image. Two metal tabs, each connected to a wheel, colliding inside the safe, and scraping past each other. The twang, the vibration --this was contact, but not productive contact. He needed the tabs to connect and stay connected. He needed the second wheel in the locking mechanism to roll with the first.

He turned the dial the other direction. The sound of smooth motion, a wheel spinning, looking for contact...he heard years of spinning this dial to no avail. He heard years of nothing. The safe locked away in a closet, never to be mentioned by Kevin or his dad. His mom had opened and closed this safe every day, and he had never paid any attention. Her fingers turned this dial with expert skill, stopping and changing at all the right places. The door always opened for her.

Kevin thought of the last time this safe had been opened.

He could hear his mother working, her fingers turning the dial. A long spin, a stop, a short counterspin, a stop. She opened the safe.

Kevin had been in his bedroom, holding a ruler over a bean sprout grown in a coffee cup. His dad was playing music downstairs. A quiet woman singing over a solo guitar. His dad was making a sculpture of the sun. To this day, it was the only piece of art his dad never finished.

Kevin wrote down the date and measurement of the bean sprout. Everyone in his class had to keep a log of their bean sprout.

A loud crash, a body falling, a dish breaking.

Kevin ran from his bean sprout to see what happened. His mom was on the floor, sitting up, looking dazed. A brown book lay face down in the corner of the room. The shattered remains of a coffee mug lay across the floor.

"What happened?" Kevin asked.

"I don't know," said his mom. She looked in his eyes, saw that he was scared. "It's nothing. I'm fine. I just -- I must have been lost in what I was reading and tripped over my own feet."

Kevin's dad came upstairs. "What's going on?" he said.

"Mom tripped over her feet," Kevin said.

His dad cracked a smile. "Are you alright?" he said.

"Yes," said his mom. Her eyes were pensive. She looked confused. "My internal clock must be off, that's all."

Kevin's mom had just returned from England, where she had gone to visit an expert on the work of Peter Gerrard.

"Do you hear something?" she said.

Kevin and his dad stood still.

"I've got Jessica Tannen on the CD player," said his dad.

"No, not that," said his mom. "It sounds like wind, no, it sounds like a flute, many flutes."

Kevin's dad closed his eyes.

"I don't hear flutes, Honey. When I listen, I hear what I always hear," said his dad, referencing the hum without speaking its name. "Tell me more about what you hear."

Kevin remembered the sense of panic that had come over him that day. If both his parents became Hearers, any chance of a normal life for him would be gone forever. Fortunately, his mom put an end to it.

"You know, it's nothing," she said. "I think I took a nasty fall and that's it. Just a nasty fall."

Flutes. Kevin heard flutes inside the safe. He pressed his ear flat against the steel door. It was a familiar sound. It was a butterfly on his shoulder, the last taste of sweet sap from a fallen elm tree, the memory of his mom's voice breaking into a dream.

Kevin spun the dial and heard another click. This time two wheels connected, no twang, no vibration. The door was one step closer to opening. The flutes grew louder.

He sunk his shoulders and lost himself in the sounds. He was listening less for the clicks of a locking mechanism and more for those flutes. He was chasing that sound.

Another click. Another step closer. He didn't know how he was doing it. He just knew that if he followed the sound with his mind, his fingers would find the path to get there.

The final click, followed by a crash. It reminded Kevin of the elm tree in the park, falling to the ground with a sudden violence. The lock had come together. The bolt slid out of the way.

Kevin leaned back and opened the safe.

## You Will Understand Everything When You Read It

Courtney Browne took her son, Kevin, to the library on Saturdays. It was on one of these Saturday outings that Courtney discovered her passion. While Kevin, only six at the time, looked through a stack of children's fantasy books, Courtney opened a thick text that someone had left on a table: *The Origin of Insect Societies* by Peter Gerrard.

She had heard of Gerrard before, live in Turquoise for long enough and you're bound to, but she had never paid him any attention. The first section she read gave evidence that termites were building complex, functional skyscrapers long before the first humans ever set foot on the earth. As she raced through the chapters, skimming information about the ruthlessness of an ant colony and the camaraderie of a beehive, she wondered how she had lived for so long, unaware of the amazing things happening under her feet.

That afternoon, Kevin left the library with a paperback titled *Invasion of the Brain Sharpeners*, and Courtney left with the text that became known in the Browne house as "Mom's Big Bug Book."

She stayed up all night to finish *The Origin of Insect Societies*, journaling her thoughts as she read. She spent the next morning in the backyard, looking at bugs.

A year after her first encounter with Gerrard's text at the library, she published her first professional research article. It was about insects unique to Northern New Mexico, and was well-received in *Etymology Review*. She applied for and received a research grant to travel from Canada to Mexico and follow the migration of the Monarch Butterfly, just as Peter Gerrard had done in the 19th Century. Shortly after her notes from that trip were published, she received an offer to travel to England and meet eminent biologist Tristan Nelson III.

"I'm amazed at your work," Nelson told her. "I have no doubt that had you started earlier, had you devoted your life to research as others have done, you would now be one of the greatest scientists of your generation."

"That's kind of you to say. Thank you, Dr. Nelson," said Courtney.

Nelson wore beige and brown tweeds. His voice was soft and weak with age. They sat in his office at King's College. It was nearing midnight on a Thursday. Only the cleaning staff joined them in the building.

"So many have attempted to follow Gerrard's footsteps, but you captured the essence of what made his research so spectacular," said Nelson. "It's more than a passion for bugs that sets his work apart. It's humility and awe at the accomplishments of the insect kingdom. That is what made Gerrard the greatest Etymologist of all time, and is why you are his legitimate heir."

"His heir?" said Courtney. "What does that mean?"

Nelson unlocked a door at the back of his office, revealing a one-room library of antique books. Nelson ambled to the back of the library, motioning Courtney to follow him. He pointed at a metal safe on the bottom deck of a bookcase in the corner.

"I'm too old to bend down that far," Nelson said. "I will tell you the combination and you will open it."

Courtney squatted in front of the safe.

"Three turns to the right, stop at 24," Nelson began.

For nearly a minute Courtney spun the combination lock per Nelson's instruction. When she stopped at the sixth number, something inside fell with a startling weight, and the door on the safe swung open.

"Go ahead, take it," said Nelson. "It's yours now. But there are conditions of ownership."



Courtney reached inside and retrieved an ancient leather-bound book.

"What are the conditions?" she asked.

"The first and most important condition is absolute, unequivocal secrecy," Nelson said. "There are people who desperately want this book, and would have no qualms about killing you to take it. You must tell no one I gave it to you. No one."

"The second condition is that you must take this safe. It was made specifically to hold this book. It is the most secure safe in the world. It was made by a locksmith in the mountains of Switzerland and it cannot be cracked. If you forget the combination, neither you nor anyone else will open the safe ever again."

"It's an amazing book," Courtney said. A decorative crystal was sewn into the front cover. "Why is it here, and not in--"

"A museum?" Nelson laughed. "Tonight I'm going to leave you here, so you may have your first reading of the manuscript in a secure place. If you are indeed meant to have it, as I believe you are, you will understand everything when you read it."

## Chapter 10

Kevin retrieved the brown leather book from the safe. He knew right away that he was holding a book that was decades, maybe centuries, old. The leather was worn to the point of being soft. The pages were flakey and delicate. Kevin had seen this notebook only once before. On the day he found his mom splayed on the floor, her coffee mug shattered and her face confused, this notebook lay face down in the corner. On that day, he had only seen the back cover.

He would have remembered the front. Attached to the front cover, sewn into its lining with criss-crossing leather straps, was a small, round crystal.

Kevin reached into his pocket, retrieved the crystal he had found on the side of Turquoise Mountain, and held it up next to the notebook.

"What is this?" Jackie said.

Kevin shook his head. With the care of someone handling a precious painting, or a child, Kevin walked the book out of the closet and gently placed it on his mother's workbench. He lifted the brown leather cover, cradling the attached crystal with his hand as he opened the notebook.

*The American Desert: A Chronicle of Observation.*  
*By Peter Gerrard.*

"Kevin, this is an original Peter Gerrard manuscript," said Jackie.

"It's probably worth a fortune," said Joseph.

The words on the title page were handwritten in the tidy script of a different age. The pages were old, worn, and thin. Joseph was right. This book probably belonged in a glass case in a prestigious museum.

Kevin turned the page and read the first sentence.

*There is a treasure inside Turquoise Mountain, worth more than all the money in the world.*

The page clung to Kevin's fingertips. He continued reading.

*There is a higher place of awareness. Most are oblivious to it. In Turquoise, the treasure dominates this place. It calls out to those who can hear it. I can feel it tingling through my fingers and toes; I can sense it all around me; but most of all, I can hear it. The strongest human connection to this higher place*

*is through sound. The connection is so strong in Turquoise that townsfolk hear it, and have no idea what they're hearing.*

The power of the words made Kevin feel confined and uncomfortable. All this time, in the same house where he and his dad slept every night, tremendous secrets, locked away in the safe. Peter Gerrard was a Hearer.

*I came to Turquoise while following the Monarch Butterfly. The amazing butterfly's annual migration will divert itself thousands of miles if necessary to ensure there is always a stop at Turquoise Mountain. I can't help but think that they are called by it too. The pull of the mountain is mysterious and strong.*

Kevin turned the page and found a hand-drawn sketch of Turquoise Mountain. The hum rose in volume and Kevin looked up from the manuscript to see what was happening.

But as soon as his eyes left the page the hum went quiet again.

"This is weird," he whispered.

"Tell me about it," said Joseph. "This is the same picture that's hanging on the wall above Cassandra's bed."

"Is it?" said Kevin. He looked back to the book. The hum grew loud again. He kept his eyes on the page, allowed the hum to swell in his ears.

Jackie turned the page.

The hum roared, like someone grabbed the volume knob and cranked it up. The change surprised Kevin, and out of instinct, he closed his eyes and covered his ears with both hands.

The hum was quiet again.

"What's wrong?" said Jackie.

He opened his eyes. For some reason, he expected the room to be different, to be bigger, more open, and was surprised to find it unchanged.

He looked back at Gerrard's manuscript. On the left page was a diagram of a termite, all its body parts labeled. On the right was a mess of spiral doodles, as if Gerrard was trying to get the ink flowing in a ballpoint pen.

The volume returned. It was like the normal hum was trapped inside a tin can, and the spiral designs on these pages ripped the lid open so he could hear it in its un-muted glory.

"It's that book," he said. "It does something to me."

Jackie looked at Gerrard's manuscript, apparently unaffected by it. She lifted it from the table, just slightly, and Kevin caught a glancing view of a spiral shape on the open page. The hum resonated in proportion with the amount of page he could see. This time he wasn't taken by surprise, and found it to be tolerable, if unsettling. He held his gaze on the book.

"It's like a choir is singing inside my brain," he said, and listened to his own words get churned and enveloped inside the sound.

Kevin closed his eyes, stood still and listened. The hum was present, as it always was now, but nothing like what he heard when he looked at the book. The drawings on the page, the spiral doodles especially -- they connected with his brain. They were like words, or symbols, meant to bring forth a specific association in the mind, and with these doodles, the association was a sound.

He heard Joseph and Jackie breathing, his own heartbeat, the movement of the breeze outside, something scuttling across the floor. He opened his eyes and turned his head to the scuttling sound. It was an ant. He reached with his foot and squashed it.

He looked back at the manuscript. After the shock of the volume had passed, he focused more intently on the sketch. He sensed patterns inside it.

The sound brought forth vivid images in his mind: his dreams from the night before. A basketball game, a memory of his mom in Johnny's barber shop, the crystal sinking into a flowing mass of termites.

Kevin's cell phone rang, startling him from his trance.

"Unknown number," Kevin said, looking at the display. He answered it.

"Hello, is this Kevin Browne?" It was a man's voice, deep and resonant, familiar.

"Yes?"

"Do you know that right now your name is being mentioned on closed circuit radio channels operated by the federal government?"

"Kevin it's him!" Joseph hissed. Kevin waived Joseph away with his arm.

"Who is this?" Kevin asked.

"Someone who would hate to see an innocent kid take the fall for something he didn't do."

"Give me the phone," Joseph said.

"I'd like to help you, Kevin, but first I need to get you someplace safe," said the voice at the other end of the phone. "A warrant has just been issued for your arrest. Your arrest will be carried out by a secret agency who has the power to wipe your name out of existence if they deem it necessary."

"Arrest? Who is this?"

"They're going to take you out of school citing truancy – it's still illegal to ditch school in Turquoise, you know. That's what the officials will tell your teachers. But they really want to take you in for questioning about the explosion at Turquoise Mountain."

"Give me the phone, Kevin!" Joseph shouted. "That's Lou Sweeney!"

Feeling befuddled, Kevin handed his cell phone to Joseph.

"Mr. Sweeney, my name is Joseph Silver. Kevin, my sister and I were at Turquoise Mountain yesterday when the explosion happened. We know who did it."

"Lou Sweeney?" Jackie said.

"Well, now, this is interesting," said the voice on the other end of the phone. Even the muted sound of a voice coming through a cell phone pressed to someone else's head was audible to Kevin's ears, and now, with a name to attach to the voice, Kevin recognized why it was familiar. It matched the voice that once bellowed from the radio in Johnny's Barber Shop.

"Yes, Mr. Sweeney, it's a long story. The woman who blew up the mountain, we broke into her house – I found a copy of The Shuberville Tribune."

There were several seconds of silence on the other end of the phone.

"So, there were three of you at the mountain yesterday?"

"Yes," said Joseph.

"Are all three of you together now?"

"Yes."

"Listen, carefully young man. The three of you are in terrible danger, more than you can possibly imagine. It is imperative that you come to The Global Mug coffee shop as fast as you can. Do you know how to get here?"

Joseph looked to Jackie. "It's downtown," she said.

"Yes, we know where it is," said Joseph.

"You recognized my voice – I assume you know the password."

"Yes, Mr. Sweeney, I've read all your books," said Joseph.

"Say the password to the server at The Global Mug. She will take you to me. Now hang up this phone and run, Boy. Don't finish what you're doing, don't explain to your parents, don't even stop for the bathroom. Get out your front door and start running. Goodbye."

Kevin heard the click ending the phone call. Joseph closed the phone and handed it to Kevin.

"What was that all about?" asked Jackie.

"You heard the man," said Joseph. "We've got to go."

"We can't just go meet a strange old man sight unseen," said Jackie. "Stranger Danger you goofball!"

"Oh get off it," said Joseph. "Even if this were a loony old man with bad intentions, what can he do to us? Can he run as fast as a car? Can he jump over ten-foot fences? Can he fly?"

"Point taken," said Jackie, "but Kevin and I are in the middle of something."

"Didn't you hear him?" said Joseph. "We're in danger!"

Jackie sighed.

"Will it be alright if we take a break to humor my crazy brother?" she asked Kevin.

Kevin glanced back at the book on his mom's desk.

"This comes with us," he said. "We'll take my backpack."

"This newspaper too," Joseph said, "and the crystal, we should take the crystal."

"Why?" Jackie said.

"This is Lou Sweeney," Joseph said. "We need to tell him everything. If anyone will know what's going on, he will. I want to show him everything."

"How is he going to know anything?" Jackie asked.

"When we get there we'll find out, I'm sure," said Joseph. "We've got to go now!"

"We're not showing him this book," Kevin said. "My mom didn't want to show it to anyone."

"Maybe we should leave it here," Jackie said.

"No!" shouted Joseph. "Lou knows what he's talking about! If he says you're in trouble over Turquoise Mountain, then it's true, Kevin! For all we know, your house might be raided by federal agents while we're gone. Don't leave anything here you wouldn't want them to see."

Kevin sighed. He wished he had a few seconds to think. Apparently, he didn't. He stuffed the book and crystal in his backpack, and they went out the front door.

"Alright Jackie," said Joseph, bouncing on the balls of his feet, "lead the way downtown."

## Chapter 11

A cowbell clanged as Jackie pulled open the front door of The Global Mug. The inside was a cramped space, cut in half by a large serving counter. A wallpaper of local bulletins and political paraphernalia was interrupted only by a blackboard menu that hung on the center of the back wall. They were the only customers inside.

"Hi! Welcome to The Global Mug! I'm Amy!" chirped the girl from behind the counter. The girl, eighteen or nineteen years old, smacked her chewing gum between sentences. The smell of fruity lip gloss and perfume emanated from her person and mixed pungently with the shop's aromas of coffee, tea, and espresso.

Jackie shot Joseph a look of skepticism.

"Would you like to try a Half Caff Triple Shot Vanilla Latte With Soy today?" asked the girl. Her voice swung from high to low in a sing-song way that announced in no uncertain terms that this girl, Amy, was a ditz.

"No thank you," said Joseph.

"Okay." Two smacks on her gum. "How about a Double Mocha Macchiato?"

They said nothing.

"Alrighty!" said Amy. "I can take a hint. One shot of The Global Mug's world famous espresso for each of you!"

Joseph took a deep breath.

"The password is mustard," he said.

Amy's eyes darkened. "Follow me," she said. Her voice was the same, but it was as if she had turned into a different person. She looked older, smarter, even intimidating. She swung the countertop open, revealing a downward stairwell behind her. She pulled a remote control from her pocket and began pressing buttons. Automatic steel shades appeared from inside the ceiling, covering the windows and doors of the coffee shop.

"Come on!" Amy commanded, waving her arm to summon them to the stairwell.

They followed her down the stairs, Joseph going first, Kevin going last. A door at the bottom led to a storage cage, where cans of coffee beans, jars of tea leaves, and assorted dishes lined the walls, surrounding an automatic stair-climbing exercise machine that begged someone to ask what it was doing

there. Amy led them around the stair-climber and to a steel door at the back of the cage, held closed with a sizable padlock. She opened the padlock with a key from her belt and pulled back the door, revealing another stairwell. This one was narrow, and as they followed her to the bottom, Kevin's backpack scraped against the walls. They landed in a round room with concrete walls and a high concrete ceiling. Metal ladders stretched across the ceiling from one end to the other, like monkey bars on a playground. For no discernable reason, a single rope hung from the ceiling to the floor. Hanging between two of the metal ladders was a lone light bulb, filling the room with a pale yellow glow. A popsicle stick of a man sat in a small wooden chair against the back wall. He wore a dirty blue uniform with a white oval patch over the breast pocket. On the patch were the words "Liberty Pest Control."

"Tom?" said Jackie.

"Hello Ms. Silver," said Tom in the same slow, Southern accent Kevin had heard the day before when he met this man at Joseph and Jackie's house.

"You do their pest control?" Amy asked Tom.

Tom nodded.

"Good," said Amy. "So they check out."

"They check out," said Tom. "If they were in league with her, we'd know by now."

"In league with whom?" asked Jackie. "What's going on?"

"We'll let Lou answer that for you," said Amy. "We bring him out."

"We bring him out," Tom repeated.

Amy and Tom turned to face a steel door under the stairwell. They approached it together, slowly, as if performing some sort of ritual. Amy banged her fist on the door three times. Locks unfastened on the other side, each with a loud clang that echoed around the concrete room. The door opened to reveal a stubby man with a long nose and bursts of tangled white hair.

"It's him," whispered Joseph.

"In the flesh," said the old man, his deep voice taking Kevin back to the memory of Johnny's Barber Shop. "Tom, can you introduce me?"

"Ms. Silver, Mr. Silver, Mr. Browne," said Tom. "This is Lou Sweeney."

## Chapter 12

Lou Sweeney wore a faded purple shirt and loose-fitting blue jeans. His skin was beyond pale, having settled somewhere between white and translucent, but his eyes were pure black, the pupils grown so large as to fill all the visible space, looking to Kevin like two raisins in a bowl of skim milk.

"You've met my business partners, and you knew the password," Lou said, the echo of his familiar voice in the concrete room creating the unusual sensation that they were inside one of his radio broadcasts.

"Here's the proof, Mr. Sweeney," said Joseph.

Joseph unzipped Kevin's backpack and retrieved the newspaper. He handed it to Lou, who unfolded and began reading. The room froze. Kevin thought of all the unusual things that happened in the past two days, and wondered if this was the strangest moment of all. Five people standing in a concrete room deep underground, watching an old man read a newspaper.

Lou handed the paper to Tom, who gave it only a passing glance and handed it back to Lou.

"It's the real thing," Tom said.

"Tell me how you came to possess this," Lou said to Joseph.

"Be careful what you tell him," Jackie said.

"It's okay, Jackie. If you can't trust Lou Sweeney, who can you trust?" said Joseph. "Mr. Sweeney, my friends and I broke into a woman's house this morning. We did it because we have reason to believe this woman blew up Turquoise Mountain. I stole this paper from her house."

Lou put his hand on his chin and stood in silence for a time. "Tom, show our friends your picture," he said.

Tom reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a black and white photograph. He handed it to Joseph, who gasped, and thrust the picture at Kevin.

The picture was worn at the edges. The upper right corner was torn. It was old, and had been handled too much.

The picture showed a young girl, twelve or thirteen years old. The girl stood in front of a bookcase, holding a framed document for the camera to see.

The resemblance was undeniable. The girl was a young Cassandra D'Antonia.

"I assume you recognize the girl in this picture," Lou said.

*Recognize the girl...the girl in this picture...* Lou's voice came to Kevin as if in another dream, and Kevin realized he had fallen into his own world. He had become mesmerized with this picture, not because it showed Cassandra as a teenager, but because of the object she held in her hands. The framed document was covered in the same spiral shapes that Gerrard drew in his manuscript, the hum...

Kevin turned the picture away from his eyes. Jackie took it from his hands.

"Are you okay?" she whispered to Kevin.

Kevin nodded. He felt like he had just returned from outer space. He felt shaken, disturbed even. Inside those spiral drawings, Kevin had seen Turquoise Mountain.

"We have much to tell each other," Lou said, "but not here. We go inside."

"We go inside," Amy and Tom echoed.

"Excuse me," Jackie said, "but I'm not going anywhere until you tell us what's going on."

"What's going on, my dear guests, is the end game," said Lou. "Like it or not, I fear you have set in motion a chain of events that cannot be stopped. There is only one place in the world that is safe for you now, and it is my headquarters. I cannot make you follow, but I strongly encourage you to do so. Time is short, and certain death awaits you if you don't do exactly as I say."

With that, Lou turned and went back through the steel door under the stairs. Tom and Amy followed him, leaving Jackie, Joseph, and Kevin alone.

"I want to go," said Joseph.

"Of course you do," said Jackie. "You've been waiting for this day your whole life. Are we going too, Kevin?"

Kevin glanced at the photograph in Jackie's hand. The hum swelled in volume.

"We need to find out what's going on," Kevin said.

"Excellent. I'll go first," said Joseph.

As soon as they stepped through, Kevin wondered if they'd made a mistake. On the other side of the door was a pathetic, dirty bedroom, with an air mattress, a ratty blanket, and an ancient television mashed into a corner. A shower stall and toilet occupied the back wall, without even a curtain to separate them from the rest of the room.

"Welcome," said Lou. "And relax, this isn't Headquarters. This is Tom's room."

"To get to Lou, you have to go through me," Tom said with pride.

Kevin looked for a door in the back of the room, a way "to get to Lou," but saw no way out. All six of them were piled into the small room, pushing towards the dead-end back wall.

The wall is a dead end, the room is a dead end, maybe this entire visit with Lou Sweeney and his oddball friends is a dead end, Kevin thought.

Then, as if to prove that this was a waste of time and these people were indeed nutcases, Lou stepped into the shower stall and began turning the knobs. The squeaks and clangs of underground plumbing echoed behind the mildewed shower tiles. Apparently, Lou was going to take a quick bath with his clothes on.

Kevin nearly turned to Jackie to make a sarcastic remark, but a spectacular sight interrupted him. The wall behind Lou separated at the seams between the tiles, opening like elevator doors. Bright light filled the gaps, and music, the most lovely classical music, broke through from the other side. Kevin had the sensation that they were looking into another world, some strange alternate dimension of paradise on

the other side of a grimy shower stall two stories underneath The Global Mug coffee shop. By the time the shower tiles stopped moving, a wide door had opened, exposing a brightly lit hallway on the other side.

"Follow me," said Lou.

Three crystal chandeliers hung in a straight line across the hallway's ceiling. A red carpet stretched the length of the floor. Tiny speakers hung just beneath the ceiling, filling the hall with classical music.

"I can't believe it's time," said Amy. "I knew the day would come when I would return to Headquarters. I haven't been down here since we finished construction."

"Amy is our face in the outside world," Lou said. "It was vital that we kept her clean."

"They can smell you," Tom hissed at Kevin, as if answering some question Kevin should have asked.

"No turning back now," Lou said.

"No turning back," Amy and Tom agreed.

A steel door marked the hallway's end. It sounded like fifty people were quietly chattering on the other side of the doors. A part of Kevin wondered if they were walking into an elaborate trap, if an army was waiting on the other side to capture them.

Lou pulled a miniature flashlight from his pocket and turned it on. He aimed the beam of light at a small, diamond-shaped glass panel next to the steel door and held it there for a few seconds.

"Photo reception sensors," Lou said. "Amy, Turquoise's favorite coffee barista, is also the most talented electronics and radio engineer in the world."

"You're too kind," Amy said.

"And you're too humble," said Lou. "Our enemies will come with many weapons, but they won't come with flashlights."

Cued by the flashlight hitting the photo reception sensors, the steel door slid open, revealing a black and white tiled floor, a towering ceiling, a winding staircase against a far back wall – Lou led them out of the hallway, and into an underground palace.

"Welcome to the headquarters of our global operation," Lou said.

Kevin was stunned at the grandeur of the place, but also weirded out. The chattering people he'd heard from the other side were not real, but were the sounds of at least twenty televisions, all playing at once. The décor of the huge room was a mix of artwork and TV monitors. A pattern lined the walls. Oil painting, TV, sculpture, TV, marble water fountain, TV -- the TV's showed 24-hour cable news and nature shows and stock tickers and strange low-budget videos of wide-eyed people talking directly to the camera. The sounds of multiple talking televisions buzzed on top of the light classical music, the whole panorama blending into its own hum upon the hum already in Kevin's head.

Kevin was reminded of another underground house. Like Cassandra's home, the nicest part of Lou's place was hidden from the rest of the world. An antique sofa and chairs set formed a conversation circle at the center of the room, and inside that circle, on a stone coffee table, stood a Tingley 2000 espresso machine, the words "Lean Mean Caffeine Bean Machine" scrolling across its digital display. Kevin imagined Lou sitting on the sofa, by himself, watching one of these TV's and sipping espresso.

A half wall on their left separated the main room from a full kitchen. Inside the kitchen was an old, beat up avocado green refrigerator. Even Kevin, who cared nothing about fashion or decorating, couldn't help notice how out of place the ugly refrigerator was in this underground palace.

"Is that a Pitcher Plant?" Jackie asked, pointing toward the back corner of the room. On an end table, inside a glass case, was a plant that matched the description Jackie just gave it. It was shaped like a lemonade pitcher without a handle.

"Good eye," said Lou. "What do you know about Pitcher Plants?"

"I know that it's odd for someone to keep it in his home," Jackie said.

"Right you are," said Lou. "Many housekeepers might find the Pitcher Plant's ways of feeding..."

"Distasteful?" said Jackie.

"I like this girl already," said Lou. "Come take a look."

Jackie, Kevin, and Joseph approached the glass case. The bright green leaves of the plant formed a pitcher that was more than a foot deep. At the bottom of the pitcher was a pool of murky water, and a dead ant.

"In nature, the pitcher plant uses colors and smells to attract insects into its trap. My Pitcher Plant is domesticated, so I have to feed it. Once a week, Tom meets me at the front door, and gives me a lovely specimen he has collected on the job. You can see that yesterday's meal is still being digested."

"Caught that little fire ant in your living room yesterday," Tom said to Joseph.

"The water in the bottom contains enzymes that digest the bug," Jackie said.

"More importantly," said Lou, "the inner walls of the plant are shaped and coated just right so that once a bug falls in, it can't get out."

"So why do you have this?" Jackie asked.

"Like everything in my headquarters, this plant has a story, and believe me, I'd love to tell them all, but today it's important that I tell one story in particular. We don't have much time, so please, have a seat and I will explain everything the best way I know how, over espresso prepared with the Tingley 2000."

### Chapter 13

"The young woman in the photograph is Gretchen Brinkley," said Lou, gesturing at the black and white picture that Jackie still held in her fingertips. "We knew she was in Turquoise. It's why we're here as well."

They sat in Lou's antique furniture surrounding the Tingley 2000 espresso machine, which Lou had programmed to make six cups. Kevin had removed his backpack, and placed it on the floor between his legs. He held onto the shoulder straps with both hands.

"Her name isn't Gretchen," said Kevin, "it's Cassandra D'Antonia. She's a friend of my dad."

"An alias, yes," said Lou. "Her real name would only bring trouble for her, and she has no patience for trouble. This I know firsthand. It's curious to me that she took a friend. How does your father know her?"

"My dad and Cassandra are both Hearers," said Kevin.

Tom and Amy sat forward in their chairs. Amy whispered, "Of course."

"We've long suspected the Turquoise Hum had something to do with her presence here," said Lou. "I don't fully understand the connection of the hum to Turquoise Mountain, but I know one exists. Gretchen, or Cassandra as you know her, clearly has an interest in the mountain. We have proof that yesterday's explosion was her doing. I'll show you that in a minute."

"We have proof too," said Joseph.

Jackie sent a stern look her brother's way. Lou caught it and apparently understood.

"No, please – it's important that we be honest with each other," Lou said. "I would like to hear everything you know. I'm curious why you were at Turquoise Mountain at all yesterday."

"It's a complete coincidence that we happened to be at the mountain when the explosion happened," said Jackie, "that's all. You tell us your story first, then we'll tell you ours."

"Fair enough," said Lou. "I suppose I should start my story with a question. Do you believe in demons?"

"Demons?" said Jackie. "Like little devils."

"Or big ones," said Lou. "Let me try it this way. If I told you that there were giant, viscous, bloodthirsty monsters in this world, the stuff of your worst nightmares, unlike anything you'd ever expect to see in this warm blanket we call reality, would you believe me?"

"I might," said Jackie. "Lately, I've found myself believing in some unbelievable things."

"Really?" said Lou. "I'm eager to hear more on that. But you have asked for our story first."

Lou reached inside his chair, between the cushion and the armrest, and pulled out a comically oversized remote control. Using two hands, he pointed the remote at a television across the room, which



turned on to show a close-up picture of an animal's footprint in the sand. The footprint was a large, deep oval with a triangular indentation at the bottom.

"Have any of you ever seen tracks like these?" Lou asked.

"Yes," said Jackie, "just yesterday we saw them. More than once. What are they?"

Lou took a deep breath through his nose. The Tingley 2000 beeped. The display screen read, "Done. Please enjoy your espresso," in large green letters. Six streams of thick, black liquid poured from the machine into tiny porcelain cups on the serving tray.

"Ah, time for espresso," said Lou. "You'll indulge me, I hope, as I will insist that everyone in this room drinks a cup."

"I'll skip, thank you," said Jackie.

"Me too," said Kevin, looking at the steaming black liquid and wondering what his dad was doing right now.

"Sadly, that isn't an option," said Lou, raising his cup to his mouth and taking a sip.

"There are only two smells that throw them off track," said Tom. He held his cup out in display. "This is one of them. Insecticide is the other."

"Are we talking about these demons again?" asked Jackie. Her voice was laced with sarcasm, but inside the hum, Kevin heard something different. He heard the sounds of fear resonating on the edges of her words. He felt it too. The events of the past twenty-four hours had blown up their notions of what was real and what was fantasy. They now lived in a universe where superhuman powers existed, the pages of books triggered sounds in the mind, and Joseph's crazy radio announcer might have been the only sane person all along.

"We are indeed speaking of demons," said Lou. "The same demons who left mysterious tracks in the dirt at Turquoise Mountain. The same demons who have chased me all over this earth, and who I fear are now on your trail, and won't stop until you are dead. Now please take an espresso. I insist."

The room sat in silence for a moment. Joseph reached under the Tingley 2000 and took a cup. Kevin and Jackie did the same.

"Good," said Lou. "Kevin, your dad's friend, Cassandra...does she happen to like espresso?"

"No, she calls it Turquoise's Disgusting Habit."

"Right on," said Amy, as Lou and Tom laughed.

"Forgive us," said Lou, "you have no idea how gratifying it is to hear that your work is appreciated. Turquoise indeed has an espresso habit, and the architects of that habit are sitting in front of you. The Tingley 2000 Espresso Machine, a staple in the households of Turquoise, is my idea, and Amy's design, and the financial backbone of our operation. It's no accident that The Global Mug serves the best espresso in the world, and sells the world's best espresso machine. We're turning the entire town into an unfriendly place for Gretchen Brinkley, one cup at a time."

Kevin didn't know whether to feel insulted or gratified that these strange people disliked Cassandra so much. "So...are you saying Cassandra--"

"They're saying she's a demon, Kevin," said Jackie.

"No, not quite," said Lou. "She's not a demon. She's their queen."

Lou took another sip from his cup. He looked from Joseph to Jackie to Kevin, the way a parent might look at a child after explaining the truth about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy.

"Wild," Joseph said.

"Too true. Reality is wild," said Lou. "I'm so glad you made it here safely, and have had some espresso to protect yourself. I hope you each will finish your cups. Sadly, I expect we'll need the protection this drink affords sooner than we'd like. We'll now begin at the beginning. This story asks of the listener to believe the unbelievable, but not without proof. I have prepared a video and we'll show it to you now."

Lou stood up and gave his mammoth remote control to Amy. Lou and Amy exchanged a knowing glance before Amy went back to her chair with the remote. Amy began pressing buttons on the remote, too many buttons, as if she were dialing a phone call to China. Her hands shook. The color drained from her face. Tom reached from his chair and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Does anyone need to use the restroom?” Lou asked.

No one said anything. Amy closed her eyes and took two deep breaths, in through her nose and out through her mouth. She hesitated, then pushed a final button with her thumb. All the televisions on the walls turned off at once.

“We begin,” said Lou.

“We begin,” echoed Tom and Amy.

The Tingley 2000 started beeping, even though there were no espresso cups to fill. The beeps grew louder, until they were downright obnoxious. The display screen on the unit lit up, and turned bright red.

“What’s wrong with your coffeemaker?” asked Jackie.

“Nothing,” said Lou. “It’s just grabbing your attention. All throughout Turquoise, in most every home and office, thousands of Tingley 2000’s are sounding this alarm. People are gathering ‘round their espresso machines, wondering what’s going on. Some will try to unplug the units, and will be frightened to find that each machine has a secret battery backup and cannot be turned off. The machines will alarm for just a few more seconds before commencing their routines.”

As predicted, the machine stopped beeping. The display screen went from red to black to gray. A man in a dark suit stepped into the picture. The Tingley 2000 display screen, which Kevin had always thought was too big and too fancy to deliver its silly jokes about coffee, had become a miniature television, and it showed a man in a black suit, standing in front of a blank gray wall. The man in the suit was Lou. His white hair was nicely combed but otherwise he looked no different than the person sitting with them. The TV version of Lou spoke to the room like the president addressing the nation from the White House.

“Hello, I’m Lou Sweeney,” the man on the screen said. “Please pardon this interruption to your day. I have a message you must hear.”

### **The Demon Queen of Shuberville**

The power came to fruition seconds after Ms. Stephenson showed her Peter Gerrard’s letter to Julius Adams. Gerrard had the power as well, and somehow he had captured it on paper in a series of spiraling shapes. To the untrained eye, they were no more than nonsense doodles, strange adornments on a strange letter.

Gretchen saw more. She saw how the spiral shapes represented something innate but unseen in the world. In those spirals, she saw years of Peter Gerrard’s research, recorded for posterity in a more dynamic and enduring way than written words could ever accomplish. She saw that Peter Gerrard had once unlocked secrets of the natural world beyond the simple ambitions of science, and she felt inspired to do the same. In those spirals, Gerrard had given her the tools to understand her purpose in this life. They cued her brain to the part of the hum that was hers. Once aware of that part, the rest was easy.

She was no longer a passive listener. She now controlled the volume, pitch, and timbre of the hum in her mind, and in so doing, she controlled the world around her. She could move objects without touching them, she could change things by looking at them, she could initiate destruction with her thoughts.

It was well after midnight. Gretchen was in the alley, listening to the fire ant mound, but through the hum, she could hear what was happening back at the apartment. Ken had returned from a night at the bars. He was drunk. His day had gone poorly and he was in a mood. He yelled a tirade at Gretchen’s mother about dirty dishes and empty refrigerators. Eager to turn her thoughts to something else, Gretchen focused on the ant mound.

Controlled rage was their sound in the hum. The fire ant colony owned the entire alley behind the apartment, and they managed their empire through violence and rage. Gretchen loved the sounds of the colony. She related to them. She heard them in herself.

Gretchen had long suspected that the scars on her arms and legs were connected to this mound, and now she knew it to be true. In his drawings, Gerrard had given her the power to unlock her subconscious mind, to pull forth any memory from her life, even the ones her brain had hidden away for her own good.

She was a baby, old enough to sit up, but not old enough to talk. The memory attached no words to the concepts, only base instincts, like fear. It was night. She was sleeping in her crib. Sharp, fiery stings shot into her arms and legs, one after another. Instinct pulled her to a sitting position, told her to scream, and pulled from her throat a sound that could wake a mother from a grave.

In the memory, she could see crumbs of a cookie scattered across the crib. She could see the open window, leading to the alley behind the apartment. Baby Gretchen didn't know what the ants were, but she knew they were the enemy. She used her hands to swipe at them, which only angered them more. They were a swarm of rage. They intended to kill her.

Her mother appeared in the memory and rescued her. Gretchen was pulled to safety, the sound of the fire ants fading, her own sound in the hum growing stronger.

Through the memory, Gretchen could sense their rage, and it was the rage she understood. The fire ants harnessed a rage so powerful that, together, the colony was an unstoppable force in its microcosmic world.

She felt a kinship with them. She felt rage at her mother for leading such a pathetic life. She felt rage at Ken Childress for abusing her mother. She felt rage at herself for allowing it to happen.

For years, this rage flowed through her blood like the poison of a thousand fire ant stings, with nowhere to go. It reached out through her scars, into the hum, and she had never understood it.

Until now.

In Gerrard's letter to Julius Adams, she saw something at once horrible and amazing. It was something far away, inside a mountain in the American Southwest. She wanted it. Through her rage, she would have it.

Standing over the mound, listening to the hum, Gretchen touched her own sound to that of the colony. Strands of music, intertwining, mixing, becoming one – she would use her power to tie herself into this colony, and its beauty, power, and rage would be in her hands.

Peter Gerrard had once looked upon a mountain and wanted it too. Fire ants weren't yet in North America in Gerrard's day, and he never had the opportunity to witness the power of their fury.

The sounds from the apartment rushed into Gretchen's ears a second too late. A scream, a drunken shout, a strike to her mother's face. Somewhere deep inside her, a part of Gretchen cried out. Let go, run back to the apartment, save her – but these were not the parts of her that connected to the colony, and the colony was already taking hold.

Thousands of workers, hundreds of soldiers, one queen, living for a purpose larger than themselves, dying for the sake of the colony.

Ken struck Gretchen's mother again. This time she crashed into the kitchen counter, hitting her head on a sharp corner. She died instantly. Gretchen felt the rage inside her swell to new heights, and this the colony understood.

She opened her eyes. She and the colony were now united in purpose. The ants read it in her thoughts, and at once they were in agreement about what must be done. There was a mountain in the American Southwest. They would have what was inside. But first they would feed their rage.

In single-file line the soldiers came out, and as they marched with grace and precision, they grew. With each step they changed. They used Gretchen's powers in the hum to double in size, then triple. Pattering steps became jackhammer strikes in the dirt. A line of ants became a horde of wild, hideous monsters, charging into Shuberville.

It was a nighttime raid. The human part of Gretchen, fading, knew only that Ken Childress should be a target. The larger part of her that now belonged to the colony wanted more. Gretchen's rage, directed at Ken, flowed through the colony like electricity, and matched their thirst for empire. Ken Childress could go, but the entire town had to go with him. Once the ants were seen, every resident was a potential enemy. The people of Shuberville owned gasoline and shotguns and dynamite and other weapons that could be used against the colony. They had telephones and cars that could spread warning around the

world. Gretchen imagined the military sending bombers and tanks. The colony saw this vision and understood. No one could survive this night. The empire began here.

And as Gretchen resigned herself to the necessity of a massacre, she latched onto the last piece of her mind that was hers, and ran. She ran ahead of the colony, to a small house in the heart of town. She used her mind to break open the front door. Ms. Stephenson, the librarian, came running into the front room, her pallor a match for her white nightgown.

"Ms. Stephenson, you have to leave," Gretchen said.

"Gretchen? What is this? What's happening?"

Ms. Stephenson tried to turn on a light, but the power in Shuberville was already gone.

Behind Gretchen the front door stood open, and the sounds of Shuberville's demise bellowed into Ms. Stephenson's home.

"Get in your car and go," Gretchen said. "I'm letting you leave."

"Letting me--"

A monster crashed through the window, shards of glass and broken brick flew past Ms. Stephenson as she screamed. Gretchen held out her hand, and the monster stopped. Standing still, in the remains of Ms. Stephenson's front room, was a giant fire ant. Large as a horse, its six legs had grown thick and strong, its body turned sharp and sleek.

Between her screams, with only the moon to light the scene, Ms. Stephenson saw broken images of the monster. She saw its giant mandible jaws, and sensed its desire to tear her apart. She saw its antennae, which her mind later turned into horns. She saw that its head was the color of fire. She later told her son that it was a demon from hell, come to pass judgment on the world, and Gretchen was its queen.

"Into your car, now," Gretchen said. "Leave Shuberville, and don't ever come back."

Ms. Stephenson did as she was told, seeing fire, destruction and death in her rearview mirror. She drove to her brother's house in Vicksburg, found her son in the spare bedroom, woke him, and threw her arms around his neck.

"Thank God you were here," she said. "Thank God you weren't in Shuberville tonight, Tom."

## **The Exterminator**

*Go to Sanders Mill off Route 20. Follow the creek going south. Keep going. When it's time, someone will find you. And remember, you and I never spoke.*

For more than an hour, Lou followed the creek through a mix of light forest and mucky swampland. At times he couldn't hear his own footsteps over the croaking bullfrogs, chirping crickets, and mosquito buzz. It occurred to him that he was walking to the middle of nowhere, where he could disappear and no one would know.

Just like Buzz.

"Hello Mr. Sweeney," said a voice from behind him.

Lou turned to see a tall, slim silhouette leaning against a tree.

"Yes, I'm Lou Sweeney. Who are you?"

Steam rose from the wetlands underfoot, hiding the man's lower half, and creating the effect of a towering shadow floating in the darkness.

"My name is Tom Stephenson. I'm the exterminator in these parts."

So it was a trap. Lou had pried his nose into a small town's business, and they in turn had lured him out in the night to be exterminated.

"I'm the only surviving citizen of Shuberville."

Lou said nothing.

"Does the word scare you?" said Tom. "Shuberville?"

Lou shook his head, still saying nothing.

"Then I have a lot to tell you," said Tom, "starting with this. When we're done here tonight, and you leave this place, you are to speak of Shuberville and The Demon Queen like the spoken words themselves can kill you, because they can. Another radio announcer came here once, asking about Shuberville... The Demon Queen killed him."

"That's why I'm here," said Lou. "I want to know what happened to Buzz Tingley. I want to find the truth."

"I know," said Tom, "I know the truth about Mr. Tingley. Years ago, on a night just like this, he stood where you're standing, and heard the same words I'm about to tell you."

Tom reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small photograph. Old and worn at the edges, the black and white photograph looked and felt like it had been handled for decades. In the moonlight, Lou could see it clearly enough.

The photograph showed a young girl, maybe thirteen, standing in front of a shelf of books. She held in her hands a framed document.

"This is the only picture I have of her," said Tom. "My mother took it in the library a few days before the demons came. The camera was still in her car when she escaped. My mother was the only person to survive the massacre, but she didn't live long. Whatever mercy she was shown on that awful night was short-lived. She swore to me that the Demon Queen herself let her leave, and we all would be safe. But the next night the demons came to Vicksburg. They killed my mother, my aunt, and my uncle. They've been chasing me ever since."

"Who are you talking about?" said Lou.

"I'm talking about Gretchen Brinkley, The Demon Queen of Shuberville."

## Chapter 14

Lou's voice continued to ramble out of the espresso machine.

*"When you last heard from me it was on the radio, now some five years in the past. I told the world of a small town named Shuberville, and a little girl whose life went terribly wrong. I spoke of my mentor, the late, great Buzz Tingley, who was onto the story, and mysteriously disappeared in the pursuit. I came within seconds of saying the name of the foulest, most dangerous, most evil person of our time."*

Kevin thought about his dad's Tingley 2000, sitting on the kitchen counter, Lou Sweeney speaking out of the display screen, delivering a message of doom to an empty house. Kevin knew that doom was where this video was headed. He could hear it in the hum. The pulsing vibrations on the outer edges of the sound were deepening, becoming more ominous, and closing in on the hum's center. It was an audible warning to Kevin that something terrible was about to happen.

*"And then I went off the air. Today I return to finish my story. I come to you in this unusual manner, via your Tingley 2000 espresso machine, because the evil person of whom I speak has the power to shut down your radio, shut down your television, shut down your computer. In order to deliver the story of our age, I had to create a new medium of communication."*

*"So we begin at the end. The story of the Demon Queen of Shuberville. With those words, my radio program came to an unceremonious conclusion. What you are about to see is the security camera footage taken inside my studio on that fateful day."*

The screen cut away to a shot of a modest radio studio, viewed from the ceiling. A younger Lou Sweeney sat in the broadcast chair, speaking into an over-sized microphone.

"The story of the Demon Queen of Shuberville," the young Lou Sweeney announced. A crashing sound filled the audio track and a cloud of dust filled the picture. A tall, slim man, it was Tom, appeared in the chaos and grabbed Lou by the arm. They ran out of view. Half a second passed with no one in the shot. Then a horrible nightmare of a picture filled the screen on the Tingley 2000. A monster, shiny and sleek, legs antennae and jaws, a living torpedo on six legs, charged into the shot from the left and

trampled the now-empty broadcast desk. A second monster appeared, and turned its hideous face directly into the camera. Two meat-hook jaws opened and closed, and the screen went black.

Jackie grabbed onto Kevin's arm.

The gray wall and dapper Lou in his black suit re-appeared on the screen. *"I escaped that day because I knew they would come, and I was ready for them."*

*"My mentor, Buzz Tingley, wasn't so lucky. The people of the town of Shuberville weren't so lucky."*

*"It is in honor of their memory that I now share with you the story of a young woman from Shuberville, Mississippi. The woman's name is Gretchen Brinkley..."*

A worn black and white photograph, the same that Jackie still held in her fingers, filled the display screen. Lou's voice played over depressing violins.

*"You are now seeing the only known picture of Gretchen Brinkley, the Demon Queen of Shuberville,"* Lou's voiceover said.

For the second time, Kevin's eyes were drawn to the framed document the young girl held in her hands. The spiral shapes...he could feel himself drifting away as before, and forced his eyes away from the screen. He saw Tom pull a handheld computer from his pocket and examine it with a grim look on his face.

*"You have never heard of Shuberville, because it no longer exists. But once, not long ago, Shuberville was a small town on the Mississippi Delta..."*

Tom left his chair and went to Lou.

"They're on the move," Tom whispered in Lou's ear.

"How long?" Lou whispered back.

"Fifteen minutes, maybe."

"Fifteen minutes until what?" Jackie said.

Tom and Lou were startled that Jackie had heard their whispers, and neither responded. Kevin answered for them.

"Fifteen minutes until these demons arrive," Kevin said. He heard it in the hum. A low resonance at the bottom of the sound told him of an approaching tidal wave of destruction, rumbling silently towards them.

"Yes, that's right Kevin," said Lou. He paused, letting his voiceover on the video fill the silence.

*"Many killers throughout history can claim multiple victims. Only Gretchen Brinkley can claim an entire town..."*

"Excuse me," said Jackie. "But is this for real? Why are monsters coming here?"

Jackie was speaking directly to Kevin, but Lou answered.

"We knew they would come," said Lou. "This broadcast had to be initiated from somewhere. When Amy pressed the buttons on her remote control, she sent a signal through the radio waves to every Tingley 2000 in Turquoise to play this video. Gretchen's beasts can hear radio waves with their antennae, and trace them to their source. Buzz Tingley learned this the hard way. The day of my final broadcast, I witnessed how rapidly the demons can arrive and destroy."

Jackie turned to Kevin. She said nothing, but Kevin knew from her eyes what she wanted to ask. Lou had answered her second question. *Why are monsters coming here?* He hadn't answered her first.

Kevin gave her a slight nod, enough to provide his opinion. Yes, he thought this was for real. The hum swelled in his head. He didn't know why, or even how, but he knew something terrible was coming. Rage.

Rage is what he heard. Focused, physical rage was moving toward them, and it would be here soon.

"I feel like the three of you have an interesting story to tell us, if only we had time," Lou continued. "But we have to get moving."

As if on cue, the lights went out. The video on the Tingley 2000 continued to play, providing the only light in the room.

"They've gone after the power plant," said Tom. "They're trying to stop the broadcast."

"Of course they have," Lou said. "Give it another second. We have two backup generators."

Now Tom appeared on the Tingley 2000 video screen.

*"My name is Tom Stephenson. I am the sole survivor of the Shuberville Massacre..."*

The lights came back on.

"All according to plan," Lou said in a calm voice. He nodded at Amy, who lifted her giant remote control and began pressing more buttons.

On the Tingley 2000, black and white pictures of a small town were fading in and out. Tom's voiceover was speaking about life in Shuberville before it was destroyed.

"What are you doing now?" Joseph asked Amy.

Lou didn't give Amy a chance to answer. "Do you remember a few years ago when downtown Turquoise had a rat problem?" Lou said. Amy continued pressing buttons on the remote control.

"Yes," said Joseph, "I asked Tom about it once, and--"

"And I told you I knew nothing about it," said Tom. "That was a lie."

"There never was a rat problem," said Lou, "just a few carefully placed rodents in every downtown office building. Enough to convince the city that Liberty Pest Control needed a permit to dig deep into the sewers and root out the infestation."

"I remember when this whole section of downtown was fenced off and covered in tarps," Jackie said. "That's when you built this place, isn't it?"

"Correct," said Lou. "And this place is so much more than is apparent to you even now. My friends, you've now seen Gretchen's demons on my video. You may have noticed their similarity to the common fire ant. The space underneath The Global Mug is not only my worldwide headquarters and center of operations. It is also the world's largest ant trap, and we are the bait."

Using her thumbs, Amy pushed two buttons on her remote simultaneously, triggering a response from the television screens lining the walls. All around the room, the glass TV screens rolled down like car windows, exposing deep cubbies behind them. From inside each cubby, a huge, round, steel showerhead emerged.

"Insecticide," said Lou. "For years, Tom has experimented with the most potent concoctions. When Gretchen's demons break into this room, they'll get a deadly shower. We will be long gone by then."

Lou took a final swig of espresso and stood up.

"And now, my friends, it's time to go," he said. Possibly sensing that Jackie was already about to press him further about where they were going, Lou continued, "Don't ask questions, just follow me."

Kevin stood up and put on his backpack.

"Unless there's something really important in there," Amy said, "I suggest you leave it behind."

"What's in here is very important," Kevin said.

"May I keep this espresso cup?" Joseph asked, "as a souvenir."

"I said no questions," Lou called from the kitchen, "and the answer is yes."

"I'm putting this in your backpack, okay, Kevin?" Joseph said, unzipping Kevin's backpack and dropping the cup inside.

Jackie put the photograph of Gretchen Brinkley on the coffee table.

"That comes with us," said Tom, grabbing the picture and putting it in his breast pocket.

"Come on!" Lou called.

Kevin, Jackie, and Joseph hurried to the kitchen, where Lou had opened the doors of his avocado green refrigerator. Inside there were no shelves, no food, no drinks. Instead, there was another stairwell leading deep into the darkness. Stuck to the refrigerator's inside front door was a flashlight. Lou grabbed it and shone a beam of light down the corridor.

"I'll go first," Lou said. "My dear guests, Tom, Amy, and I have trained for years for this day. We will move quickly."

"Don't worry about us," said Joseph. "We can keep up."

## Chapter 15

The stairs inside Lou's refrigerator descended into what might have been an abandoned sewer pipe. When they reached the bottom, Lou pulled on a lever that slanted from the wall and a path of lamps along the ceiling flickered to life. A long, straight tunnel lay in front of them. Hanging directly underneath the lights and stretching the length of the ceiling was a steel ladder, the shadows of its rungs striping the floor, which for some reason, was covered in a thick sheen of yellow goop. At the other end, at least a hundred yards ahead, the tunnel ended with a wooden door on a concrete wall.

Lou reached across the width of the tunnel with both arms, forcing the group to crowd behind him.

"Amy, tell our guests about your special carpeting," Lou said.

"The yellow liquid on this floor is made of self-assembled molecular nanolayers," Amy said. "The lights overhead are curing it as we speak. In a few seconds, it will become the stickiest substance on earth. Touch it and you'll be stuck for the rest of your life."

Lou pushed on a panel of the cement wall with both hands, and it slid back, revealing a small closet. He reached inside and removed a wooden barstool.

"Do as I do," he said. He climbed on the bar stool, then jumped and caught one of the rungs on the ceiling. He began swinging from rung to rung, crossing the ceiling like a child on a jungle gym, his feet dangling over the sticky yellow floor.

Amy jumped next, followed by Joseph, then Kevin.

"Go ahead," Tom said to Jackie.

"I go last," Jackie said. "I don't want to slow you down."

"Ms. Silver, I insist you go first," said Tom.

"Do as she says, Tom!" Lou shouted from the front of the pack. "We'll wait as long as we can for all to cross, but the slowest must be in the rear."

Tom sighed, stepped onto the barstool, and jumped to the nearest rung. Kevin heard Jackie follow, and knew without seeing that she had foregone the stool altogether and jumped from floor to ceiling.

Kevin listened to six pairs of hands swinging from rung to rung. If the slowest really were in the rear, Kevin, Joseph, and Jackie would lead this group. Lou didn't know the truth about his guests. In the midst of all the crazy stories told over espresso, they never got to the story of three kids who ate the sap from a fallen elm tree and found themselves able to jump tall fences, run as fast as cars, and in Joseph's case, fly. As Kevin watched Lou move at the front of the pack, his arms swinging with great agility, particularly for an old man, he thought about some of the strange things he had seen on the way down to Lou's mansion. A stairclimber, monkey bars on a high ceiling, a climbing rope -- in the minds of Lou, Tom, and Amy, three outsiders, even young, healthy outsiders, couldn't possibly keep up with people who have spent their lives preparing for this moment.

Twelve hands grabbing and releasing steel rungs, each handhold sending vibrations through the ladder, vibrations that were silent to the normal ear -- for Kevin, the vibrations rang their way into the hum, and got lost in the sound of approaching annihilation.

They're close now.

Kevin chose not to say anything. Speaking it aloud might make it real, and he wanted it all to be in his mind. They had come to this strange place on a whim, listened to this unusual story...

An explosion and a cave-in sounded nearby. Wood, brick, stone, and glass were destroyed.

"They're here," Tom said.

Lou, the leader of this hanging-monkeys line, was only half way across the tunnel. Kevin considered working his way to the side of the ladder and passing to the front, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound. A cacophony of shrieks, the sound above them was like a thousand fingernails on a blackboard.

"They've reached the main room. The insecticide shower has started," Tom said.

"Everyone go easy, and be careful not to fall!" Lou called out. "Our first line of defense is working. We have plenty of time to get across."

The echo of Lou's shout was interrupted by another explosion of concrete, this one inside their tunnel. Kevin turned his head for only a second. The glimpse of a scene taking shape behind Tom and Jackie matched the sound in the hum so perfectly that he didn't need to see it. He knew what it was. A



black and red mob, flooding the tunnel, a shadow inside a cloud of dust and rubble. The demons were here. They had to move faster.

“Don’t panic!” Lou shouted. “They cannot cross this floor!”

Kevin turned back for another look. The demons emerged from the dust cloud. Giant ants with waiving antennae, shiny legs that crackled at the joints, their heads were blood red, their bodies were black. Each monster had two machete-like jaws that hung in opposing directions, two curved blades that snapped open and shut as the creatures piled into the tunnel. They opened their jaws and screamed, then charged like a stampede of wild horses from hell. They would reach Jackie first.

Strength, agility, speed, the hum, flight – it all seemed so quaint now. For a brief time, Kevin had imagined himself a superhero, but in the face of monsters straight from a comic book, he wanted to run away, and could only hope Lou’s sticky floor would work as promised.

The charge was immediately cut short. Like quicksand, the yellow goop swallowed the bottoms of the demons’ legs, and they were stuck. Seeing the relief in Kevin’s eyes, Jackie turned back for a look herself, just in time to see the monsters break free. Chunks of concrete and sticky yellow goop went flying as the creatures tore their legs from the ground and kept on coming.

Jackie turned forward and flew across the rungs, crowding in behind Tom, who could not move fast enough.

“They’re still coming!” Kevin yelled.

Behind them, the demons trudged through the tunnel, tearing chunks of concrete from the floor with every sticky step. Yellow gunk collected on their legs, slowing them down, and the demons in the front succumbed, falling forward, their entire bodies laid flat in the yellow muck. Still the horde charged forward, those in the rear trampling their fallen counterparts in a continuous stampede. Even with the sticky floor giving them difficulty, the demons were gaining ground, and would be on Jackie in seconds.

“Joseph! Jackie needs help!”

“Keep going!” Jackie shouted.

Kevin turned back to see Jackie facing the wrong direction. Her back was to Kevin. She was looking directly at the charging monsters and swinging backwards along the rungs.

The leaders of the ant pack screamed again, and began piling one on top of the other, as if they had run into an invisible wall. One broke through at the bottom, until Jackie turned her gaze toward it and it slowed again. She was pushing against them with the force of her mind. Between the sticky substance on the floor and Jackie’s own power, the demons had slowed enough for her to put some distance between herself and the horde.

Ahead, Lou was nearing the tunnel’s end. Kevin didn’t know where Lou’s underground hovel went next, and he didn’t care. For now they just needed to reach the end and go through the door. Salvation from this nightmare had to be on the other side of that door.

Lou reached the end and jumped to safety. “I’ve made it!” he called back.

He was the only one. Something crashed into the ceiling, sending a violent shock across the ladder. Amy screamed, and fell from the ladder.

Joseph’s reaction was fast, and superb.

Kevin saw it all as if it were in slow motion. Amy falling. Joseph letting go of the ladder, flying forward, catching her from behind, carrying her to safety at the other end of the tunnel.

Kevin turned back to see a pile-up of giant ants, the one on top having clamped its jaws around the width of the ladder. With a smooth, scissor-like motion, the demon bit through the steel beams, snapping the ladder in half.

The clang of broken metal echoed through the tunnel, and the demon wasn’t done. It reached forward, clamped its jaws around the ladder again, and began to pull.

The metal posts that held the ladder to the ceiling stretched like toffee. Kevin could see what was going to happen, hear it even, but could do nothing to stop it. With one strong tug, the metal posts nearest the demon broke, and one end of the long ladder was off the ceiling and entirely in the creature’s grip.

Like a puppy with a shoe, the demon shook its head from side to side, ripping the entire ladder loose from the ceiling.

Kevin's body and legs thrashed in ways they weren't meant to go. He held on tight, but for no good reason. The ladder fell. The last steel post holding it to the ceiling snapped. Kevin's stomach lurched as gravity took hold. In a few seconds, he, Tom, and Jackie would all land in the yellow gunk and the chase would be over.

Kevin moved without conscious thought, doing what his instincts commanded. As he fell, he pulled his body through the rungs, bringing the ladder beneath his feet milliseconds before it landed in the muck. Kevin's knees bent slightly to absorb the impact. He caught his balance and stood straight, both feet centered on top of a rung, the rubber soles of his shoes just centimeters removed from the yellow floor beneath.

There was an ominous second of silence. Kevin looked forward to see clear space in front of him. Lou and Amy lay against the door on the far wall, safely clear of the fallen ladder and the yellow goop. Joseph was flying back through the tunnel, headed for Kevin.

Behind him, the demons screamed again.

"Get out of here!" Jackie yelled. "I'll hold them back!"

Kevin turned to see Tom and Jackie, both stuck in yellow muck, its gooey surface rising over the bottoms of their shoes.

"Your boots, Tom!" Kevin yelled. "Unlace them!"

Tom was looking at Joseph, his eyes open wide at the boy flying through the tunnel. "What in the world?" he mumbled.

"Unlace your boots, Tom!" Kevin shouted. "Bend down and do it now!"

Still mesmerized, Tom did as he was told.

"Jackie," Kevin whispered.

Jackie couldn't bend down to untie her shoes. If she broke her concentration from the oncoming horde, even for a second, they all were finished.

Wishing he had time to be cautious, Kevin stepped to the right, aiming for the thicker, outside beam of the ladder. His foot landed on the metal and slipped to a stop a hair's breadth from the yellow muck. He took two more quick steps, placing one foot directly ahead of the other, the side bar of the ladder now a balance beam that separated him from certain death. He stepped past Tom just as Joseph, flying in from behind, grabbed onto the tall man's shoulders.

"I'm coming up behind you Jackie," Kevin said. "Stay focused."

"What are you doing?" Jackie said. "You need to get out of here."

Kevin passed Jackie and ducked low, careful to stay out of her line of sight. He straddled the ladder in front of her, and with a horde of bloodthirsty monsters mere feet away from him, he crouched down and untied Jackie's shoes.

Behind Jackie, Joseph had pulled Tom from the muck, leaving behind a pair of dirty black boots.

"Go Joseph! I'll get her out of here!" Kevin shouted.

"Get me out of here? What--"

Kevin didn't let her finish. As soon as her laces were untied, Kevin wrapped his arms around Jackie's waist and lifted her out of her shoes and clear of the yellow goop.

The distraction was just enough to break Jackie's concentration, and she lost her push against the demons.

Kevin didn't run so much as jump from rung to rung on the fallen ladder, his feet landing on the center of each bar, barely clearing the muck below. Behind him, the monsters were gaining. He wanted to go faster, but if he lost his balance for even a second he was dead.

A shadow stretched over his head. The demons were right on him now. Something seized Kevin's back, and he cried out, sure he was going to die. He and Jackie were lifted into the air. He imagined the giant mandible jaws that tore through a steel ladder, now wrapped around his waist.

He turned to face his fate, and saw Joseph. He had picked them up and was flying them to safety, a tumbling, unsteady heap of bodies in the air, Joseph pushing Kevin and Jackie like a battering ram.

Joseph let loose a shout, and threw his passengers across the final stretch of yellow goop all the way to the far wall and the door, which now stood open. Jackie and Kevin fell through the open door and into darkness. The salvation Kevin hoped to find at the end of the tunnel was a dark, empty hole. He and Jackie were plummeting to the bottom.

## Chapter 16

“Grab onto the rope!”

Lou’s voice echoed in the darkness as Kevin and Jackie fell.

From below, Lou clicked on a flashlight, and the hole became an eerie world of light and shadow. As he spun out of control, a hanging rope appeared in Kevin’s line of sight. It was well beyond his reach.

Human figures flew past. Tom, Lou, Amy – they were climbing down a rope, watching helplessly as Kevin and Jackie tumbled through open air.

“I’m bringing it to us, Kev!” Jackie shouted.

Despite Jackie’s warning, Kevin wasn’t ready, and the rope swung past him. He heard the rope snap taught as Jackie grabbed hold. He fell past her. The rope swung back like a pendulum. This time he clamped his hands around it. Feeling immense friction and rope burn, Kevin’s instinct was to let go, but he forced himself instead to tighten his grip. His shoulders absorbed all the momentum of his falling body, giving him the brief sensation of rubber band arms before he came to a stop.

They were in a shaft, hanging from a rope that descended into a void. Kevin couldn’t see the bottom.

“We’re on!” Jackie shouted.

“I’m going to move the rope out of their reach!” Lou yelled back.

Lou pointed his flashlight at the ceiling, and waved it back and forth until he found a diamond-shaped glass panel. He held the beam over that panel for a few seconds, then gears and belts behind the rafters began to spin, dragging the entire rope toward the far wall.

Joseph’s silhouette flew through the open door at the top of the shaft. A monstrous head followed him inside.

Kevin saw only the shadows of its antennae and jaws. Those jaws, which moments earlier had torn through a steel ladder, now reached for the rope, and missed it by inches.

“Ha!” Lou shouted. “They can’t reach! Fast as you can now, it’s a race to the bottom!”

The first demon charged through the doorway, an apparent suicide leap. It wasn’t alone. Like a freight train falling off a bridge, a line of demons, their legs intertwined, poured inside. The light beam bounced around the shaft as the group descended, giving only a strobelight view of what was happening. The next time the light caught the demons, they were a chain of bodies hanging down the shaft, already covering half the distance between the doorway and Lou.

“Coming down!” shouted Joseph, who flew past Kevin, Amy slung over one shoulder; Tom over the other.

“I can see the bottom,” Joseph called out. “It isn’t that far. Jump, Kevin!”

Kevin took a deep breath and did as Joseph instructed, landing hard but intact. Tom and Amy stood on either side of him, Joseph having brought them to safety. Joseph went airborne again to rescue the others.

The concrete floor was sloped, like the underside of a giant bowl. Kevin landed at the lowest point in the center. Under his feet was a circular metal plate, surrounded by a ring of glass. Kevin felt like he was standing on the drain of a giant sink. Tom tugged on Kevin’s shirt, moving him out of the way just in time for Jackie to land. She winced when her feet, covered only in socks, connected with the metal plate.

Above them, Joseph had retrieved Lou. It was now a race between two falling bodies. Joseph, Lou slung over his shoulder, was in near free-fall through the open air. A chain of monsters was only seconds behind them.

“Stand aside!” Lou called from above. Tom pushed Kevin and Jackie away from the center of the floor. Lou pointed his flashlight at the ring of glass surrounding the metal plate. The plate sprung open like a toothpaste cap. Inside was another hole, another ladder, more darkness.

“Down the hatch,” Tom said.

Amy and Jackie crawled into the hole. Kevin stood still. He felt like he was going to throw up. He would almost prefer to stay and face the demons rather than go even deeper into the bowels of the earth.

But going down was still the only option. In the glare of Lou’s flashlight, Kevin got his first view of the entire shaft. The rounded floor curved into wide, sloping walls, stretching to the top in a smooth, continuous shape. High on the walls and surrounding the shaft were more stainless steel showerheads, no doubt ready to pour on another dose of insecticide. Lou had constructed a giant, underground pitcher plant, and they stood at the bottom, having lured the entire line of ants inside.

“Better get going now,” Tom said, and Kevin followed Jackie down the ladder. Tom came next. Joseph and Lou flew inside half a second before the chain of demons crashed to the floor. Using a handle on the underside of the manhole cover, Lou slammed the hatch shut and yelled, “We’re safe!”

The demons screamed. The sound of it turned Kevin’s blood to ice. Lou began to laugh. It was a crazed, high-pitched laugh, nearly as terrible a sound as the demon scream.

“This time they won’t get out,” Lou said between cackles. “Closing this hatch has released the rope from the ceiling and triggered another insecticide shower, and this one won’t stop until they’ve drowned! They cannot climb the walls of that chamber. It’s shaped like a pitcher plant. We’ve done it!”

A crash sounded above them, shaking the ladder.

“Don’t worry,” said Lou. “The bottom of our trap is lined with a foot of hardened steel. This manhole cover is made of titanium and is sealed shut with an electromagnet. Our escape is at the bottom of this ladder. The demons are finished!”

The curved spike of a demon’s jaw poked through the manhole cover and began slicing through it like a can opener.

“Oh, Good Lord,” said Lou.

“It’s a short way to the bottom!” Amy yelled. “Jump for it!”

Kevin didn’t hesitate, and as he let go of the ladder, he heard the demons tearing through the manhole cover as if it were tin foil. He landed on hard, wet ground in total darkness. Underneath the sounds of cracking concrete and chaos, Kevin heard running water. His eyes unable to make sense of things in the dark, he found his ears making a picture for him. The demon scream coming from above bounced off the floor and spread in all directions, running up the walls and across the ceiling.

They were in a cave. There was a river flowing all around them.

But the smell threw him off. He had never been in a cave, but he didn’t expect it to smell like this. It was a rich, aromatic scent.

In his mind, he saw his dad’s Tingley 2000 machine, its display saying, “Be your espresso. Sweet-smelling, strong, and full of life.”

Tom landed next to Kevin. Joseph flew down with Lou on his shoulders. The arrival of Lou’s flashlight allowed Kevin’s eyes to confirm what his other senses told him.

They stood on a small island of jagged rock in the middle of a wide underground river. Stone walls rose on both sides, curving into a high stone ceiling. All around them, the underground river bubbled like a boiling pot, stirring up black gunk from deep below. In front of them, tethered to the concrete island, was a small motor boat.

“Into the boat,” said Lou. “Underwater jets are filling the river with espresso. If we can get a lead on them, they won’t be able to track our scent.”

Lou sat at the helm and turned a key to start the boat’s engine. The group crowded into the boat, six people into a boat made for three. The boat was equipped with two wonderful, beautiful, bright headlights, that came on and illuminated a long, open stretch of cave. Even with imminent death behind them, the brief moment of light in the darkness brought comfort to Kevin.

“We’re too heavy,” said Tom.

Ignoring him, Lou untied the boat from its docking station and put it in gear. The first demon burst into the cave as the boat lurched forward.

"We have to go much faster," Jackie said.

"This is as fast as we go," Lou said quietly, resignedly.

A demon crashed into the river. A second and third piled in behind it.

Jackie pushed past Kevin to the back of the boat, and locked her gaze on the nearest monster. It screamed in response. The demons behind it pushed ahead. More were piling into the cave. In just a few seconds there would be more than Jackie could hold back.

Something splashed into the water behind the boat, startling Kevin and bringing a shriek from Amy. Joseph's head emerged from the dirty water with a determined look on his face. Extending his arms, he flew into the back of the boat, coasting across the surface of the river and pushing them on their way. With Joseph's help, the boat more than doubled its pace. Between Joseph and Jackie's efforts, they started putting distance between themselves and the demons.

The river dug a steady downward path into the cave, gathering speed as it went. At the front of the boat, Lou was throwing the steering wheel back and forth with exaggerated, crazy movements. They were far on the right side of the river when they came to a fork in the tunnel.

"Left! Left!" Lou shouted.

The river, gurgling with espresso, had become brownwater rapids, and neither Lou at the wheel nor Joseph at the rear could get them to the left end of the fork in time. Behind them, the demons had lost their footing in the deep river and now were swimming on the surface. The leader crashed into the rocks that divided the cave into left and right tunnels. The impact caused a cave-in, massive chunks of rock broke from the ceiling, soaking everyone in the boat with a cannonball splash of river water and espresso. The rockslide continued until the tunnel was full of sediment from floor to ceiling. A wave surged from behind them, carrying them far from the cave-in. The wave passed underneath, and the rapids slowed to a calm.

The cave-in had blocked out the demons and most of the riverflow. On the other side of the rock, the demons let out one more terrible scream, and fell silent. Lou turned off the engine. Joseph flew out of the river, coasting behind them awaiting instructions.

"What are we doing?" Jackie whispered.

"I...our exit was on the left side of that fork," said Lou. "I don't know which way to go now."

"How about straight ahead," said Jackie, "far from the monsters on the other side of those rocks."

"Right, right," said Lou, reaching for the key.

"Let me push," said Joseph. "At least we won't make so much noise."

Lou looked back to Joseph, a teenager flying behind his boat. Lou collapsed into the driver's chair, unable to say anything.

"Yes, that's a good idea," Jackie said. "Let's go as far as we can, as quietly as we can. When they break through, this place is going to flood something serious."

Joseph pushed them along the quiet river. The silence of the cave was a shocking contrast to the screams and chaos of the chase that led them here. In Kevin's ears, the hum's resonance swelled to fill the emptiness.

Tom was the first to speak, his slow Southern drawl announcing what they all were thinking.

"They've stopped chasing us. They know we're trapped in here so they've left us to die."

Tom's voice echoed in the cave and faded into the hum. Kevin could sense the soundwaves of Tom's words traveling ahead of them, funneled by the narrow walls and absorbed into the water below.

"Great!" said Jackie. "Just great! Are you all proud of your giant ant trap? What was the point of all this?"

"I've shared my story in full," said Lou. "It's the three of you who have some explaining to do." Lou pointed his flashlight at Joseph, coasting on the water behind them and pushing the boat like a silent motor.

"He's the only one who can fly," said Jackie.

"What were you doing to slow down the demons?" Amy asked.

"I was pushing them," said Jackie. "I can do that. It's a long story."

"I fear we may have time for long stories. No one has ever mapped these caves," said Lou. "The idea was that we'd go down the left tunnel, and if by some miracle, there were still demons chasing us at this point, the water would push them to the right, where they would be lost forever."

"Why did we have to be involved?" said Jackie.

"You didn't have to be involved," said Lou. "I was only trying to help. I called to warn you that the authorities had your names. I feared that she was intercepting the same radio transmissions I was, that she would hear your names and come after you. When Joseph told me on the phone that you knew who blew up the mountain, that it was a woman, that you had broken into her house and found a Shuberville newspaper – I was certain you were already antfood. But I invited you here anyway. I couldn't bear the thought of more innocent death, so I tried to protect you."

"Turns out you were the ones who protected us," Amy said.

"Did you know these kids had these...powers?" Lou asked Tom.

Tom shook his head.

"So what else can you do?" Lou asked Jackie.

"We're all stronger and faster," Jackie said.

"Stronger and faster than what? Or is it when?" said Lou. "When did you acquire these abilities?"

Jackie looked at Kevin, a flash of memory shared between them. It seemed so long ago, but it wasn't.

"Yesterday," she said.

"Yesterday? The explosion at the mountain," said Lou. "It's related, isn't it? You were there. That's why the feds are after you."

There was a hint of hysteria in Lou's voice, inflections that were well-rehearsed from years of dramatic storytelling. If this were a radio broadcast, he had reached the moment when he could reveal the secret that brought everything together.

"I don't know," said Jackie. "Kevin should tell the story."

Kevin's name was like a morning alarm clock. Even as his ears listened to the conversation in the boat, his mind had been somewhere else. In the quiet of these underground caves, the hum loomed in a way that Kevin could lose himself in it without even trying.

"You alright, Kevin?" Jackie asked.

"Yes. It's the hum. I don't know why, but I feel like I need to listen to it now. You should tell the story."

"The hum?" said Lou. "You're a Hearer too?"

Kevin nodded.

"Somebody, I don't care who, please start at the beginning, and leave nothing out," Lou said.

"Alright," said Jackie, "it started yesterday morning at Blackstone Park."

## Chapter 17

Kevin's arrival at Blackstone Park with his black eye, the elm tree, the sap, the butterfly, the mountain – when Jackie came to the part of the story about the crystal, Kevin pulled it from his backpack and gave it to Amy, who passed it around. Kevin listened to Jackie's story, a piece of him in the boat, reliving the events of the past two days, another piece of him soaring through the cave, riding on the waves of the hum, going far in all directions, seeing the tunnels in his mind.

"Astounding," Lou said as he handed the crystal back to Kevin. "So many amazing facets of your story, clearly there is a connection between it all. It is beyond coincidence that your life and that of The Demon Queen are so closely intertwined."

"There are no coincidences," said Amy.

"Too true," said Lou. "What surprises me most is that Gretchen lived so out in the open among you and your family. Our picture of her was taken a good twenty years ago. I'm amazed she hasn't taken steps to mask her appearance."

"It's not her appearance so much that makes me know," said Kevin.

He paused. His words sunk into the hum. His brain, already in two places at once, went to a third. He imagined spiral shapes, in Gerrard's book, on the document a young Cassandra held in her hands, in his mind.

"May I see the picture?"

Tom pulled the black and white photograph from his breast pocket and gave it to Kevin.

"Flashlight," Kevin said. Lou handed it to him and Kevin shone it on the picture. He looked in her eyes first. Cassandra D'Antonia. Gretchen Brinkley. The Demon Queen of Shuberville.

"Even then, you knew what you wanted," Kevin said to the photograph. "Why have you waited so long?"

Kevin's words echoed in the darkness.

"Waited for what?" said Jackie.

The boat slowed. Joseph had stopped pushing and floated up next to Kevin to look at the photograph.

"See this document in her hands?" Kevin asked.

"Peter Gerrard's letter to Julius Adams," said Lou. "Property of King's College in Bristol, England. Officially lost when on a tour of museums and university libraries in the American South."

"These waves and spirals all over the letter look like aimless doodles," Kevin said. "They're not. There's more to them."

Kevin pulled Gerrard's manuscript from his backpack. He opened it to the pages of doodles in the back.

"When I look at these drawings, the hum changes." Kevin held up Gerrard's manuscript for the others to see. "It's like Peter Gerrard used these drawings to capture ideas in the hum."

"What ideas?" said Jackie.

Kevin listened to the soundwaves of Lou's voice, following the rest of this conversation into the caves.

"A map," Kevin said. "Gerrard has been in these caves before. He's mapped every inch of them."

"How do you know that?" asked Lou.

"I can hear it," Kevin said. "I can hear where our voices are going after we speak. These caves twist and turn, winding in the same spiraling shape that Gerrard drew on his letter to Julius Adams."

"Can you use this map to find out where we are?" asked Lou.

Kevin nodded.

"So how do we get out?" asked Amy.

"Gerrard only mapped one exit," Kevin said.

"On the other side of the cave-in," said Lou. "We are trapped."

"No, I don't think so," said Kevin. "There's a new way to escape now. It was created yesterday."

No one said anything. Kevin stared at the open pages of the book. So lost in the hum, he was barely present in the boat.

"The drawings on the letter to Julius Adams are a map to a specific place. Gretchen saw it in the letter. I can see in her eyes that she already knew it when this photo was taken. She had already decided then, however many years ago, that she was coming to Turquoise. It's why she blasted open the mountainside."

"What are you talking about?" said Lou. "What is it?"

"There's a treasure under Turquoise Mountain. Gerrard wrote about it in this manuscript. He spent years looking for it, but he must have failed, because it's still here. I can hear its presence."

"A treasure?" said Lou.

"These caves will lead us there. We're all going to the same place, but she's approaching from the top, and we're coming from the bottom."

“Kevin, what treasure?” asked Lou.

“It’s...I can’t describe it,” said Kevin. “It’s the reason Hearers are drawn to the mountain. I don’t know what it is, but I know why she wants it. It’s power. It’s the source -- Joseph and Jackie, our abilities – Cassandra, her army of monsters. We’re all just tapping into it. We’re all touching the surface of it. If someone were to have it--”

“It would be disastrous,” said Jackie.

The memory of a demon’s scream echoed in Kevin’s ears. It mingled with the hum, twisting together, growing. Merely thinking about mixing the sounds felt dangerous. The demons had such a malevolent sound in the hum, and the mountain held so much power...

“Maybe she already has it,” said Amy.

“I don’t think so,” said Kevin.

“You’re not suggesting that we seek out The Demon Queen, are you?” said Tom. “If there’s another way out, I think we should take it and get far away from here.”

Kevin looked over the crew packed into Lou’s tiny boat. Super powers, an expensive underground trap, years of Lou’s planning, and they still found themselves trapped underground, fleeing for their lives. Tom was right. Trying to stop Cassandra from getting what she wanted was a crazy idea. They needed to focus on getting out of here, on staying alive.

“We’re coming on a bend in the river,” Kevin said. “We need to veer left. We’re going to a cavern deep under the mountain. I don’t know what we’re going to find, but if there’s a way out, it’s through there. Cassandra blasted a tunnel from the outside of the mountain and dug straight to that cavern. We use that tunnel to get out, and we’ll just have to hope we don’t run into her on the way.”

## Chapter 18

They traveled the underground river in near silence, Kevin occasionally asking Joseph and Lou to turn the boat and follow this channel, to jog it this way and avoid this turnoff. As they floated, Kevin read Gerrard’s manuscript by flashlight.

*I’ve long suspected that there is more to this noise in my mind than the frailty of age or some natural phenomenon, Gerrard wrote. The natural tendency is to ignore the sound, to try to go on with one’s daily life and hope that the incessant ringing of the ears does not hamper one’s work. Today I tried the opposite approach. Today I sat in the grass of the alpine forest, closed my eyes, and listened.*

“We’re coming on a fork ahead,” Kevin said. “Go left.”

*At first, my mind brought forth terrible memories and associations that are a necessary part of this occupation. The dual sounds of Turquoise Mountain, one noble and one malicious, are in constant struggle inside the Hearer’s mind. Today the malicious sounds came forward first and I felt a desire to seek distraction and move away from the hum. But I continued to focus, and within the bad sound, I found hint of the good.*

“Kevin?” Jackie asked.

“Straight,” he said. “The tunnel on the left is a dead end.”

*This was a new discovery, an interlacing of the noble and malicious sounds of the hum. Until today, they had always been separate and distinct.*

Kevin heard his dad’s voice, talking to Cassandra late into the night: “The bright sounds are strong, incredibly strong, and they are tied to the dark sounds.”



What did Cassandra want with his family? She came to Turquoise with a purpose, but did nothing to act on that purpose until yesterday when she blew up the side of the mountain. The picture of her holding the letter to Julius Adams was more than twenty years ago. What had she been doing all this time? Why was she coming to weekly meetings of the Hearers at Kevin's house?

*Nobility and malice, together in the sounds of the mountain, was a revelation for me,* wrote Gerrard.

*I found myself able to hear inside the mountain itself, the way one might hear the inner workings of a clock in a quiet parlor. Then I came to a stop. It was as if I had reached a locked door, and although I was still entirely in my mind, the door was real. It was consistent. Every time I followed the sounds deep into the mountain, I ran into that door, and I couldn't unlock it.*

His dad's voice, speaking to Cassandra late in the night: "For years, I felt like I could hear the bright sounds all the way to the center of the mountain, and then I hit a wall."

Kevin's mind raced ahead, wary of the conclusions it might reach.

He continued reading Gerrard's manuscript.

*High in the mountains of Switzerland, there is a locksmith, a man named Hobbes, and no lock is inviolable to him. His family has made and broken the best locks in the world for many generations. It is said that the Crown Jewels are placed in a box, and Hobbes is brought in to test their security. The question is not whether Hobbes can break the locking mechanism behind which the jewels are hidden, but how long it will take him. If he requires at least ten minutes, the locking mechanism is deemed successful.*

*I wish I could harness the skill of Mister Hobbes for my own problem. In my time in Turquoise, I have discovered principles of nature that will change the world when published. I have found in the hum a stronger and more truthful way to discern reality than the existing five senses combined. I have discovered a new way to capture my thoughts on paper, and can record my discoveries in a format suitable only for those who are ready to share in them.*

*But I cannot get past the locked door inside the mountain. I have no key. I have no locksmith.*

Kevin's dad heard deep inside the mountain too. Like Gerrard, Kevin's dad encountered a wall, a place where the mental journey via the hum came to an end. Unlike Gerrard, Kevin's dad had found a way to break through. He told Cassandra about it the night before last.

"Today, I closed my eyes and listened -- now I can hear through that wall," his dad had said.

The next day, Cassandra blew open the side of Turquoise Mountain.

"What now, Kevin?" said Jackie. "Where are we?"

Her words didn't echo as before. There were no walls for the sound to bounce against. Beams from the boat's headlights spread far and wide. The tunnel had opened into an arena-sized cavern. The flowing river had become a peaceful lake.

"We've arrived," Kevin said.

The headlights cut two beams of light all the way to the far end of the cavern, but their glow illuminated the entire space. Downtown Turquoise would fit comfortably inside this cavern. The lake stretched wide in all directions. The walls on either side were so far as to be near-invisible. A twenty story tower wouldn't touch the stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

Silhouettes and shadows of strange, giant creatures emerged from the water ahead, like rocks in a cove. The creatures were still. They were dead.

"Something terrible has happened here," Kevin said.

Amy screamed. A shape was floating in the water ten feet ahead. It was only the first. As they floated further across the lake, hundreds of hideous shapes became visible. They were the bodies of

demons, floating on the surface of the water, just as they had before a cave-in separated the group from the oncoming horde. Kevin's eyes told him to scream as well, but the hum calmed him.

"They're dead," he said. "Everything in the water is dead."

Deep, dissonant tones reverberated in the edges of the hum. Chaos, violence, death – the hum carried a memory of desperation in this cavern.

"There's been a war in here," Kevin said.

"Termites," said Jackie.

Termites? The word made a vision flash before Kevin's eyes, a dream of a flow of termites scurrying from a tree stump.

Kevin looked at the monstrous creatures, perched like statues in the water, ten times the size of the demon ants floating about. Their curved heads, rounded bodies, and translucent shells matched the bugs they had found in the stump at Blackstone Park, only on a gargantuan scale.

"Why are they so much bigger?" Joseph asked.

"Soldiers," said Tom. "Soldier termites are big and powerful, much bigger than ants."

"Fire up the motor, Lou," said Joseph. "I'm not pushing anymore. I want out of the water."

Lou did as Joseph asked. The sound of the motor filled the cavern and the boat picked up speed. Joseph flew overhead as they coasted through the floating death. Lou had to steer carefully to avoid the carcasses.

The scope of the battle had been massive, beyond what was visible on the surface. Kevin could hear it in the hum. Thousands of dead bodies were in this water, most beneath the surface. The ferocity of battle, the rage, the finality of death, all of this echoed into memory within the hum.

Lou continued his swerving path back and forth through the lake. The crew remained silent so he could concentrate as he steered. Amy closed her eyes, buried her face in Tom's chest and remained there.

Minutes passed. A shoreline came into view. Termite carcasses jutted higher above the surface as they approached. The boat hit bottom and stopped.

Ahead were dry caves, a network of tunnels with a steep upward slope.

"Cassandra's path to the outside connects up there somewhere," Kevin said. "We're deep inside the mountain."

"How deep?" said Lou.

Kevin searched the hum. Here in the center, the mountain's sound was enormous, filling the hum like a jet engine. He could hear the flaw. It was so clear now. He understood why it bothered his dad so much. Turquoise Mountain was meant to be whole, the structure in its entirety stronger and more purposeful than its parts; the hole in its side was akin to a broken string on a violin, or a dent in a trumpet. It turned an instrument of music into a noisemaker.

"I think we're looking at a couple hours of hiking," he said, "assuming we don't run into trouble on the way."

"Do you think we'll run into trouble?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," said Kevin. "There's more happening in the hum than I can keep track of."

"Maybe she's dead," said Lou. "Killed in this battle between her demons and the monsters they found down here. Maybe this is all over."

"There's a way we can check. I'll do a scouting trip," said Joseph. "I can take a quick flight through the tunnels, if I see something dangerous on the way I'll rush back. Toss me the flashlight."

Lou looked at Kevin, the de facto leader of this ill-begotten crew. Kevin nodded.

Lou handed over the flashlight and Joseph took off. The incline of the tunnels ahead was so steep that in a few seconds Joseph was out of view and his light was gone. Only the glow of the boat's headlights kept them out of total darkness.

"When he comes back, if it's all clear, we should get the three of you out of here first," Kevin said to Lou, Tom, and Amy.

Tom opened his mouth to protest, but said nothing. The Lou Sweeney Global Operation had survived only because of the presence of these three teenagers. Lou, Tom, and Amy were a liability now, and if there was even the slightest chance that the danger hadn't passed, Kevin needed to be free of them.

They continued waiting in silence until Joseph returned.

"There are more dead bugs, you can follow their bodies all the way to the top," Joseph said. "Giant ants and termites, all of them dead. They ripped each other to pieces. It's a long way, but there's a clear path all the way to daylight. It would take hours to hike and it's really steep. I was thinking if we went in waves, I could carry people."

"We were just discussing that," said Kevin, "and we've already decided who's going on the first run."

Joseph nodded in agreement. "I think I can carry all three of you," he said. "Amy on my back, Lou and Tom on each arm."

Joseph extended his hands. Lou took the left; Tom looked at the right.

"This doesn't seem proper," Tom said. "Taking me out while a lady stays behind."

"Tom, how are you even going to climb these rocks?" Kevin said. "You don't have shoes on."

Tom sighed and took Joseph's right hand. Amy wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," said Lou. "If it weren't for you, I never would have seen the outside again. After six years locked underground, I can hardly wait."

"I bet," Joseph said. "Guys, don't worry if this takes me a bit of time. I think it will be slower going with passengers."

"We'll be waiting for you," said Jackie.

Joseph took off again, carrying three adults as he flew out of sight, leaving Kevin and Jackie alone in the darkness.

Jackie took Kevin's hand in hers.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Well, let's see," Kevin said. "You and I are deep inside uncharted caves, having just been chased to within an inch of our lives by giant ants, and now we're surrounded by the remains of the world's first war between over-sized bug families. I think I'm doing alright. How about you?"

Jackie laughed.

"I wish we had a flashlight, so we could start hiking," she said. "The sooner we get out of here, the better."

"I wonder how much light we could get from our cell phones," Kevin said.

They both pulled phones from their pockets and opened them. The display screens provided a faint glow, Jackie's more so than Kevin's, but even between them there wasn't enough light to make Kevin feel good about leaving the security of the boat and its headlights.

"Do you trust your ears to take us in the right direction again?" Jackie asked.

"It's odd," said Kevin, "I don't. The hum is so loud right now, it's kind of throwing me off. It's almost like..."

His voice echoed into silence.

"Like what, Kevin?"

"Like...I'm hitting a wall."

"Everything's okay though, isn't it? Joseph can still fly us all the way out."

"Yes, nothing's changed, I've just realized something. The hum is louder than it's ever been. It's like there's a giant speaker inside the mountain, blasting the hum into Turquoise, and we're right up next to it now. But if I listen carefully, if I try to follow it, I run into a wall, just like my dad."

The hum was so full of information Kevin had a hard time processing it all. Giant dead bodies all around them, the lingering memory of a war just finished, the sound itself behind a locked door...

"Something's hidden," Kevin said.

"What?" said Jackie.

"I don't know," said Kevin. "Something's hidden in the hum. There's a hole where there should be a sound."

There were potent sounds in his backpack as well. Kevin slid it off his shoulders and unzipped it. Gerrard's manuscript was buzzing. The crystal was practically screaming.

Kevin pulled it out. Even in the faded glow of the boatlights, the crystal shimmered with unnatural brilliance.

"May I see your cell phone?" Kevin asked.

Jackie gave it to him. Kevin held the display screen to the back of the crystal.

The crystal magnified the light from the phone's display screen to a warm glow that spread in all directions, giving a clear view of the cave all around them.

"Outstanding," said Jackie. "Let's start hiking."

"You don't have shoes," said Kevin. "Maybe you should wear mine."

"Very chivalrous," said Jackie, "and silly. I'm fine. If we come to some really tough terrain, you can carry me."

"Good idea, you just let me know when you need a lift."

"I was kidding, Kevin."

"Oh."

## Chapter 19

Despite an unusual light source and Jackie's lack of shoes, they were able to hike through the tunnels at a good clip. When they rounded the first bend, they came upon a carcass, as Joseph warned they would.

A giant termite was torn into pieces, and was surrounded by assorted body parts. Kevin and Jackie took as wide a path around it as the cave allowed, and said nothing while they passed. Kevin's eyes and ears told him this creature was dead, but still he was terrified to be so near to it. They waited until the corpse was entirely behind them before speaking, and even then, spoke in whispers, as if in reverence for the dead.

"You know what I've noticed," Jackie whispered. "These tunnels we're hiking aren't normal caves. Normal caves are carved out by water. These have round walls, and the incline is constant and steep."

They walked a few more paces in silence.

"I think, all this time, Turquoise Mountain has been a nest for giant termites" Jackie said.

Kevin thought about Jackie and Joseph's conflicting interpretations of the picture in Cassandra's bedroom.

"Do you think Cassandra knew what she was going to find down here?" Jackie said.

"I have no idea," Kevin said. "I didn't expect this."

"What did you expect?"

To die down here, Kevin thought.

"Nothing, I guess. I really didn't know," he said. "The hum is loud, but it's hard to interpret. I hear something wonderful and something terrible. It's all really close. I don't know what it is. I want to find it and run away from it all at once. I hear a big blank space, too. It's like listening to your car radio and one of the speakers goes out. It's strange."

They continued their climb, passing two more scenes of carnage on the way. The tunnel widened, and split in two ahead of them. The trail of blood and body parts continued to the left, but Kevin's ears were more interested in the tunnel to the right. Kevin's feet began veering rightward without any conscious effort on his part. Holding his hand, Jackie pulled him back to the center of the tunnel.

"What are you doing?" she said, pointing left. "Isn't this the way to go?"

"Yes, but...something's over there," Kevin said.

"What? Your treasure?"

"I don't know, maybe," he said.

"What do you hear?"

"I...don't know. I need to get closer. I think we should go that way."

Jackie blew a long, slow exhale from the corner of her lips. “Are you absolutely sure we should do this, Kevin?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s be as quick as we can.”

This tunnel had tighter walls and was entirely clear of the battle remains that littered the main pathway. As they walked, Kevin paid no attention to what he saw, only what he heard. He felt like he had been following this sound, whatever it was, his entire life.

The walls gradually opened into an atrium, an open expanse of rocks and dirt filling a round room. Ahead of them, the ground fell off on a downward slope, descending into darkness. On either side were rock walls, lined with the carcasses of dead termites. They looked like they had been pushed to the sides, like someone had swept the floor, leaving empty space in the middle of the atrium. Empty, save one object in the very center that did not belong.

Kevin and Jackie looked at each other for confirmation.

“This makes me nervous,” Jackie said.

“It will be okay,” said Kevin. “We have to look.”

They approached it together.

“Why do we have to look, Kevin?”

“Because this is it. This is the locked door.”

“The locked door?”

They stopped. Kevin leaned down to touch it.

On the ground in the center of the atrium, far removed from any sources of rain or sunlight, was a tree stump. Old, dried, and cracked, it was completely out of place.

In the center of the tree stump, just as they had seen in Blackstone Park, just as had appeared in Kevin’s dream, was a hole.

“We’re here,” Kevin said.

He felt a familiar vibration in the wood. In his fingertips, he could feel what he couldn’t hear. The hum stopped at this tree stump, but the vibration kept on going. It connected to something deep and powerful.

Kevin pulled his hand away. “My dad talked about a wall. Peter Gerrard talked about a locked door. This stump is it. Behind it is the treasure Peter Gerrard was looking for. The treasure...I think the treasure is the source of the hum.”

“Good,” came a woman’s voice from the darkness ahead. Revealing itself, it revealed everything. There had been a blank space in the hum, silence where there should have been sound. Cassandra had been hiding there. The silent spot disappeared, and in its place, the hum swelled with the sounds of rage, a thousand demons that had been hiding from sight, hiding from Kevin’s mind. In seconds, an army of monsters came out of the dark and crested the hill at the far end of the atrium. The light from the crystal picked out two human faces in the darkness.

Cassandra led the group. She rode on the back of the largest ant in the army. Next to her, carried in the grasp of two meathook demon jaws, was Kevin’s dad.

“Dad! Are you okay?” Kevin ran to his dad, but on his second step, he felt like he was punched in the chest. He fell back, landing hard next to the stump.

“I want you to stay where you are, Kevin,” Cassandra said.

Kevin fumbled to get the crystal and his cell phone near each other again so he could see what was happening. What he saw in the light made him quiver. Cassandra had stepped closer into view, and Kevin could see that she wasn’t riding on an ant. Cassandra was the ant. From the waist up, she was human, the same Cassandra he had known for years, wearing the same black sweater she always wore. But where her legs should have begun, her body broke into a sleek, black, six-legged armored and segmented monster.

“Leave him alone!” Kevin’s dad shouted.

The ants at the front of the line screamed and piled into each other.

“Stop it girl!” Cassandra shrieked, and Jackie flew off her feet, soaring through the air to the back of the atrium, where she smashed into a wall of rock.

“No!” yelled Kevin.

“Silence!” Cassandra screamed, her voice booming beyond a sound made by any human, filling the cavern and shaking the walls.

“You will not move,” Cassandra commanded. “This silly game of chase is over.”

Kevin jumped up and lunged in Jackie’s direction, but giant ants swarmed around to flank him, the nearest opening its jaws and hissing in Kevin’s face. The creature’s breath was like poison. It stank of fumes, the same that once filled the air near the explosion site, the same he smelled on Cassandra’s person the night before. Kevin’s lungs felt like they were on fire. He keeled over and inhaled the air nearest the ground, quenching the burn inside with a gasp of stale air and dirt. As his senses came back to him, he realized he was surrounded. The crystal was gone.

“Now this is a nice specimen,” Cassandra said, turning the crystal over in her hands, inspecting every side of it.

Kevin said nothing.

“Your father is fine, Kevin. Your little girlfriend will be fine. Just play nice with me so I don’t have to hurt you.”

“What do you want?” said Kevin.

“You already know. You were just speaking of it. The locked door. I want you to open it for me. Your father has failed. I was very disappointed. The best Hearer in Turquoise, my best methods of persuasion, and still we could not get to The Source.”

Kevin’s mind searched for a way out of this. There was none. The demons were all around him, one with its jaws clamped around his dad’s waist. He listened for sounds of Jackie. She was at the far end of the cave, lying quiet on the ground, breathing but unconscious.

“Benjamin, I think it’s time your son and his friend came clean,” Cassandra said. “Something happened to these children yesterday, Kevin in particular. Can you not hear it, Benjamin?”

“I hear nothing but the sound of your evil,” said Kevin’s dad.

“Yes, yes, here we are, Benjamin, the greatest moment of your life, and you’ve gone deaf. Kevin, you’ll be interested to know that, for the entire time you and I have been acquainted, I was convinced your father was the key. I arrived in Turquoise twenty years ago and found myself stymied by this contraption of the termites. They guard the source not only with their soldiers, who you can see are no match for my army, but also with a door I cannot open, with some power I cannot break. So I began looking for help. I made my ants wait in mountain forests while I searched for a way to break through. I found the Hearers, and your father, the most talented Hearer of all.

“What’s strange about this story, Kevin, is that you, now a Hearer yourself, always thought your father was crazy, or at least that’s how you played.”

“I never thought he was crazy,” Kevin said.

“How sweet, but no matter. For all these years, you were the child of the most talented Hearer in Turquoise, and seemed to pay your old man’s talent no mind at all, which was good for you. It kept you out of sight. It kept you safe, unlike your meddling mother.”

“What does my mother have to do with this?”

“Your mother, bless her heart, could have done anything she chose with her life. Unfortunately, she chose to study the work of Peter Gerrard, and as she neared the end, she was getting too close to Gerrard’s secrets. I couldn’t have my best Hearer learn the truth from his own wife. He might have wanted to use his gifts to unlock the power in The Source and have it all to himself.”

“You killed my mother,” Kevin said, his soul seething with a rage to match the hum all around him.

“Of course I killed your mother, Kevin. She was too skilled of a hiker to just fall to her death. I pushed her.”

“You evil, terrible witch!” shouted Kevin’s dad.

“Now, now, Benjamin,” said Cassandra. “Let’s all remain calm. If Kevin just does what I ask of him, Courtney’s death won’t be in vain.”

"I'm not helping you," said Kevin. "I won't open the lock. You'll have to kill me first."

"We'll see about that, but it's nice to hear you think you can do it. It was because of you that I delayed your father's trip here by a day. The night before last, he and I had a long conversation at your house. That night he led me to believe he was ready to break through, so my army blasted open the side of the termite mound. But even as we made our march to the center, preparing for glorious battle, I sensed something significant outside. A powerful change in the hum. Someone was tapping into The Source in a significant way. It was you and your friends, Kevin."

"You and your friends came just in time. You came near enough to the cave that I could hear you, and I was astonished at what I heard. I called off the attack specifically to learn more about you. What happened to you Kevin? A few days ago, you were a perfectly normal boy. Now the hum sings in you and your friends like nothing I've ever heard."

Kevin stood still, and silent.

"You might as well talk to me. I know so much of your story already. You broke into my house. Your friend stole my newspaper. You met with Lou Sweeney. You told my life's story to Turquoise in an ill-conceived broadcast. Were it not for that broadcast, we might have been able to reach an understanding. I really wanted to learn about you, Kevin. I wanted to know how a soft, boring young man wakes up one morning with powers to equal my own. I would still like to know. I would like to know how you came across this crystal, which is the most lovely I've ever seen."

Cassandra held up the crystal. "Clearly, it has unique properties," she said. "Kevin, where did you get this?"

Kevin still said nothing.

"You're not so eager to speak now. But earlier today, you and your friends had no qualms about telling the world my dearest secrets! You and that foul radio announcer broadcast a picture of me, of my old home town, for all to see, and did it in such a way that I couldn't shut it down. You and I could have taken our time, learned about each other, learned how we might share in the treasure locked inside this mountain, and come down from the mountain as one. Instead, you and Sweeney chose to spread your lies. Gretchen Brinkley is dead, young man! The colony lives on! The colony thrives, and you angered it. We could not let that broadcast continue. Sweeney has been enough trouble for too long already. The colony went after you. I didn't expect you to survive, so I went back to the original plan, and took your father."

"He disappointed me. We tried several methods of persuasion, but your father cannot break through. Now it is your turn to try."

"I will ask you one time only. Unlock The Source for me. Reveal the treasure inside."

"I don't know how."

"I am not a patient woman, Kevin."

Cassandra closed her eyes, and his dad screamed in pain. Kevin turned to see a giant ant, removing its barbed stinger from his dad's stomach.

"Dad? What have you done? Dad!"

"Your father has only been given a small dose of poison," Cassandra said. "He will live for ten more minutes. I have no intention of saving him, no matter what you do, but perhaps you'd like to try your luck at it yourself. The Source is more powerful than you or me or all of us together. There is more than enough life force there to save your father, save your little friend, even to save your town."

Save my town?

"Don't you go thinking for a minute that a noble stand and your own death will leave the innocents unharmed," said Cassandra. "No matter what happens in here today between you, me, your father and The Source, we cannot let Sweeney's little infomercial stand. There are too many Hearers in Turquoise, too many skeptical minds."

She snapped her fingers twice and the entire brigade of demons backed away, their legs rumbling in unison. The atrium filled with the horrible sound of a horde on the move, a sound that had chased Kevin through Lou's failed ant trap and into the underground caves.

"The army moves," Cassandra said. "Turquoise is about to go the way of Shuberville."

"So here we are, Kevin. You, me, your dying father, and your little girlfriend."

Kevin looked back to Jackie, still lying against the back wall, still unconscious.

"I've already told you she'll be fine," said Cassandra. "And when she wakes up, you'll have her unique and impressive powers at your disposal. Let me lay out your choices for you. You can run, and I will kill you. You can fight, and I will kill you. You can break the spell, and reveal The Source. Either you or I will be the recipient of its awesome power. If it is you, you can save your father, your girlfriend, and maybe all of Turquoise if you hurry.

"So, what do you choose? You have only minutes before people begin to die."

Kevin looked to his dad. Once held in a demon's jaws, now he lay on the ground, weak and unable to move, his eyes barely open.

Kevin leaned down and touched the tree stump.

"A wise choice," said Cassandra.

## Chapter 20

The vibration inside the stump came from deep below. It brought forth component sounds inside the hum. Standing in the darkness, The Demon Queen watching over him, his dad's life slipping away, Kevin closed his eyes and listened.

He heard the malice his dad and Peter Gerrard had described. He recognized it now. Termites. Guardian monsters who had no desire to share what was inside. They didn't want people to listen, and they sent warning sounds of anger to stave them off.

He heard rage. It belonged to Cassandra, and loomed in the hum because she stood so close and was so powerful a presence.

He heard himself. His own sound was a bright trumpet, holding a note. It had blended in all this time but now made itself known. He could sense that this was important. He was going to change the sounds around him, and he needed to hold onto his own sound while he did.

He heard flutes. They reminded him of his mother's safe, and how he had followed their call and trusted that doing so would open the lock.

He heard brilliance. A radiant sound, deeper than all the others, with his hand on the stump, Kevin understood. This sound, the "bright" sound his father heard, the "noble" sound described by Gerrard -- it was The Source, the beginning of the hum, a channel through which all the other sounds flowed. The way through this lock was within this brilliant sound. There was a power in it that could not be contained.

Inside all of this was yet another sound. A swirling, moving noise that chased itself. Kevin's brain followed it, focused on it, and soon this sound drowned out the others. His eyes were still closed, his hand was still on the stump, but his mind was leaving. He was being carried away on the hum in a strange reversal of the normal course. The hum led people from all over the world towards Turquoise Mountain, but this sound was taking Kevin out of it. His mind flew from the caves, over the mountainside, past the demon horde marching into Turquoise, over Turquoise High School, down Jefferson Avenue...

He opened his eyes. His hand was on the stump, but it was the stump of a fallen elm in the middle of Blackstone Park. A man stood on the other side.

"Welcome back," the man said.

He was a slim man, with long arms, long legs, and tangled black hair. His face was sunworn, thick as leather. He wore a beige shirt, beige pants, and black boots.

"You're Peter Gerrard," said Kevin.

"I am."

"Have I found the treasure?" asked Kevin.

"What do you think?"

Kevin looked around. The sky was blue. The air was quiet. The hum was quiet.

"No," he said.



Gerrard nodded. "You haven't defeated the lock, but you've taken an important step. You have found yourself in the hum, and have chosen to follow the hum to me."

"Are you alive?" Kevin asked.

"In a sense."

"Are you real?"

"My presence and this setting are only in your mind, but our conversation is very real. We are speaking through the hum."

"What do you mean?"

"The stump in Turquoise Mountain, just like the stump here, in the park, is all that remains of a once great tree," Gerrard said. "The tree and its inhabitants were connected to The Source, just as you are, just as your father is."

"When I touched the tree," Kevin said. "Only I could feel the vibration."

"You are gifted, Kevin Browne. Most cannot sense the larger universe around them like you do. Most people cannot hear."

"But I couldn't hear anything until--"

Gerrard held up his hand. "You had never listened," he said. "The sap only enhanced who you already were. At any time, had you chosen to listen, you would have heard with or without its help."

"I've always been a Hearer?" Kevin asked.

Gerrard nodded.

"What is the sap?"

"It is The Source," said Gerrard. "It is the treasure that brought me and countless others to Turquoise."

"But why was it in that elm tree?"

"Because a colony of termites in that tree discovered it, just as another colony of termites discovered it thousands of years ago on the land that is now Turquoise Mountain. The termites in Blackstone Park were more primitive than the ones who made Turquoise Mountain, and had not yet learned what to do with their discovery or how to secure it from others, others like you. But they would have evolved, given time. Their time to learn and grow in The Source was cut short that day, because another was present, another who wanted you to find it."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Your mother. She made the elm fall. She exposed the sap inside."

"My mother?"

"Do you think it is coincidence that a butterfly flew from your mother's resting place in the mountain all the way to Blackstone Park, and landed on the elm with the weight of an elephant, just as you arrived?"

"Where is she? Can I speak with her?"

"You would need to find her in the hum. You found me because you and I are close now. You need only open the door, and you'll find me waiting on the other side."

"I don't know if I should. The Demon Queen wants inside. She wants The Source to herself."

"We are ready for her."

We?

"How do I open the door?"

"I think you already know."

"Follow The Source."

"Yes, but even your tremendous gifts aren't strong enough to open it all the way. You'll need an amplifier. You have one already."

"The crystal," said Kevin.

"Your first discovery as a Hearer," said Gerrard. "The termites bring relics of The Source with them when they travel to and from their hole. In the crystal you have found one, a piece of The Source itself, dried and solidified over time. The crystal can complete the connection. Listen to the sound. Amplify it with the crystal. Find your way through."

Kevin felt himself being pulled back into the cavern. The clarity of Blackstone Park in the daytime was fading, and soon he saw only darkness. He was in the cave, touching the stump. He opened his eyes.

"I need the crystal," he said to Cassandra.

"If you have a trick in mind, I'll kill you on the spot, and we all will lose," she said

"No tricks," said Kevin. "I need the crystal to open this door."

Cassandra gave it to him.

Holding the crystal in his left hand, he pressed his right against the stump, and listened again. He picked out the brightness, the sound of the treasure. He listened to it, letting its sound fill his ears. He listened until everything else was gone, except a lonely trumpet, holding a note deep in the distance.

He placed the crystal in the stump, laying it gently in the center hole, just as he had done in his dream. Instantly, the brightness grew. The sound became sharp, loud, louder still, now filling Kevin's head and crowding out his thoughts. He focused on it. He pulled it into the cave, into their world.

The air itself seemed to vibrate on the soundwaves. He saw Jackie, dazed but awake on the far side of the cave, looking on with confusion. He saw his dad, lying still on the ground. He saw Cassandra, her eyes red with lust.

The vibrations in the air reached to the ground. The floor began to shake, the dirt and rocks began to rumble. Kevin felt like he was hallucinating, like the waves of the hum were distorting everything he saw, but a closer look revealed something different. The ground wasn't rumbling with sound waves. It was coming to life.

All around him, the rocks and the dirt sprouted legs, bodies, and heads, scurrying familiar forms. The floor of the cavern was becoming a carpet of bugs.

Cassandra hissed, and flashed her red eyes at Kevin. The creatures on the ground were termites.

They funneled together, and moved to the center of the atrium, an inverse lava flow of bugs, moving from all directions up and onto the tree stump.

They clamored on top of each other, and on top again. They were building a column, a tower of termites, holding the crystal aloft as they grew. The tower became a swirling mass, the termites flying through the air as if caught in a whirlwind. The swirling mass began to take shape. Two arms, two legs, a head...

With a deafening screech, Cassandra charged at the mass of termites. The column broke apart and regrouped around her, swarming as her hideous shape, half woman half ant, thrashed and hissed and bit inside it. She swallowed mouthfuls of termites, opening her mouth between bites to scream, and her scream shook the walls of the cavern and knocked Kevin off his feet. More termites appeared from the earth and joined the foray. A spinning storm became a human shape became a monstrous termite became a swarm again. It surrounded Cassandra, closing in on her from all sides, until Kevin couldn't see Cassandra's shape at all. A final scream from inside the mass, and Cassandra's sound was silenced. The swarm dissipated, millions of tiny bugs flying in separate directions, leaving a patch of empty air above the stump. Cassandra was gone.

Kevin's eyes followed the bugs upward.

The walls and ceiling of the cave had disappeared. Above him was a massive, glowing bubble of clear liquid, larger than a blimp. Sap gurgled from inside the tree stump, coming out of the hole. It broke into bubbles which floated upward, coasting through the air and connecting to the larger bubble, becoming a part of it.

Jackie stood up. She ran to Kevin.

"Where are we?"

"We're on the other side," Kevin said, tilting his head to take in the expanse around him. "We've found the treasure."

Floating through the air were termites, hundreds of thousands of them. Some were no larger than those he had seen at the park; some were as big as the carcasses in Turquoise Mountain. They moved as if gravity didn't exist for them, swimming freely in all directions as they tended to the giant bubble.

A swarm regrouped in front of Kevin and Jackie, forming into the shape of a man. The shape spoke in Peter Gerrard's voice.

"She wanted it all, so none was shared," said the shape. "You are welcome to the treasure, provided the quantity you take can be replaced."

"I only want a little," said Kevin.

He pulled off his backpack and reached inside. He removed The Global Mug espresso cup Joseph had taken from Lou's mansion.

"Can you fill this cup, please?" he asked Jackie.

"Kevin, what's happening?"

"I don't know, but my dad is dying, and I think a drink of the sap might save him."

Jackie nodded her understanding. With her eyes, she guided the cup out of Kevin's hands and up to the bubble overhead. When she brought it down, it was filled to the brim with clear sap.

Kevin took the cup to his dad and placed it on his lips.

"Drink this, Dad. Please drink this and be alright."

His dad opened his eyes and looked at Kevin. Still too weak to speak, he used his eyes to communicate. More, they said.

Kevin poured the cup into his dad's mouth. His dad swallowed it like a shot, and exhaled in relief.

"Kevin, are you safe?" he said.

"I think so," said Kevin.

"Leave the way you came," said the swarm. "We will lock the door behind you."

Kevin looked past his dad. Despite the monumental change in scenery all around him, the tunnel through which he and Jackie had entered the atrium remained.

"Thank you," Kevin said, and helped his dad to his feet. They stumbled toward the arch that led into the tunnel. Kevin turned for a last look. Millions of termites swarmed up and around the giant bubble, but the human figure was gone. They stepped under the arch, and back into a tunnel in Turquoise Mountain.

"Hello?" came a familiar voice from up the shaft.

"Hello, Joseph, down here!" called Jackie.

Joseph flew into view, his flashlight leading the way. He landed quickly and threw his arms around Jackie.

"I thought you were dead," he said. "Where did you guys go? An army of demons came out of the... Mr. Browne, what are you doing here?" he said.

"No time to explain," said Kevin. "Can you carry another load of three?"

"Of course I can," said Joseph, "but then what? Thousands of demons are headed straight for town."

"I don't know," said Kevin. "We'll figure something out when we get there."

## Chapter 21

Kevin clung to Joseph's left arm; Jackie to his right. Kevin's dad, doing as he was told, put his arms around Joseph's neck and rode piggyback. When they took off, Kevin got a look from his dad, part disbelief, part exasperation. Kevin imagined his poor dad, kidnapped from his normal life by Cassandra's monsters and taken into a nightmare. He wished he had time to tell him the whole story. He wished he had time to think.

An army of monsters was rushing into Turquoise. No one knew they were coming. No one would be able to stop them. His teachers, his neighbors, people he saw in the streets and on the plaza downtown, women and children, tourists and locals, his classmates, Gabe, Ricky, Maxine, Bill, Vicky Baca and even Ruben Graves, all would be wiped off the earth, the entire town of Turquoise would soon disappear into legend, like Shuberville, Mississippi.

Kevin's burgeoning panic was countered by a momentary elation when they emerged from the mountain. More than once since the start of Lou's broadcast, Kevin was certain he was going to die. The

last ladder down, at the bottom of the giant pitcher, was perhaps the worst moment of all. Now they emerged at dusk and the fresh air of Turquoise provided Kevin a jolt of life.

The demons were nearing the foothills of Turquoise Mountain, having cut a wide scar into the forest down one side. In minutes, thousands of them would reach the city, and destroy it. He had hoped the death of their queen might have stopped their determination, but it had not. The horde galloped at full speed, trampling the earth with such force they shook loose the largest boulders near the top of the mountain. One by one, giant boulders came loose from their perches, and began tumbling down the mountainside, picking up speed as they went.

Too much speed.

Jackie's eyes were glued to the tumbling rocks. She was pulling them along.

"Good thinking, Jackie," Kevin said.

Jackie held her gaze on the mountain below, loosening every boulder they passed. The boulders in turn knocked loose more rock and sediment, which freed more debris, more boulders. A massive landslide came together at once and overtook the horde.

Boulders, rocks, logs, and dirt flattened the monsters they touched. But the landslide only caught the back end of the group. The avalanche came to a stop in the foothills, and thousands of demons emerged from the dust, their charge barely slowed.

"Get ahead of them!" Jackie shouted. "I'll try something else."

"I'm trying!" Joseph yelled. "They're fast!"

Joseph was gaining on the horde, but at this pace, they would reach town only moments before the demons did.

One by one, Jackie began grabbing the monsters with her eyes, using her power to lift them into the sky and drop them into the stampede, where they were trampled by their counterparts. Her technique was effective, but there were too many demons and not enough time. Mission Church, the unofficial entrance to town, was in sight, and thousands of demons remained.

"Now what?" Joseph said.

"Get in front and as far ahead as you can!" Kevin yelled.

Joseph tightened his grip on Kevin's hand and flew even faster, passing the horde and gaining ground. In seconds, they all would be in Turquoise. Kevin could see his house. He looked at his dad, his arms wrapped around Joseph's neck, looking on, helpless. Kevin loosed his fingers from around Joseph's wrist. Before he began to fall, he caught his dad's eye, and winked.

"Kevin!" his dad yelled. "We've lost Kevin!"

"Keep going!" Kevin called back, waiving them onward as he fell. Joseph tried to slow down, but the inertia of three bodies was too much for him. There was no way he would be able to change course and catch Kevin in time.

Kevin fell fifty feet and landed hard on the ground. He heard bones in his ankles and legs break on impact. A fierce pain shot up to his hips as he collapsed to the ground. He forced it all out of his mind. He didn't need to get up. He didn't ever need to walk again. He only needed to listen.

He cleared his mind of superfluous sound. The trampling feet, the calling of his name from above, the war cry of the demons, it all melded into a common note in his ears. He pushed all the sounds of the world together, blending them into the hum. He found the hum of the mountain, and shut it out. He heard the echo of Gerrard's swirling noise from far away, and turned that off too. He found himself, the lone note of a trumpet, and stashed that sound safely in the corner of his brain.

All that remained was rage. It was a sound with a purpose, but that purpose was out of place. These demons and their rampant rage didn't belong here. Separated from the other sounds, the rage developed an overtone of sadness.

Kevin called forth his own sound, the solitary trumpet, and touched it to the rage. Strands of sound began to mix. He could feel the central part of himself going away, becoming a part of the horde.

He could feel himself disappearing inside the rage.

The sound teased him, dangling its tremendous power before his eyes. He sensed the world in his fingers, the magic of that afternoon of discovery, of strength and speed and agility, telekinesis, flight, the hum, multiplied many times over, happening every day for the rest of his life.

For the rest of a thousand lives.

He felt the connection to future and past, of a genetic line passed from colony to colony, thousands of beings living and dying for the sake of the one colony, their individual lives meaningless in a larger infinity.

He saw the sap, a floating balloon on the other side, protected and tended to by the termites, a drop of it saving his dad's life.

How much power was in all of it?

He felt the hard leather of a shoe on Ruben's foot, kicking him in the stomach when he was already down. He sensed the footsteps of his classmates, leaving him in the mud, not one of them stopping to help, or even ask if he was okay. A few drinks of the sap made the pain go away, and gave him so much more. He could be so much more than any of them. He could do things that would make Ruben whimper. He could squeeze the last ounce of dignity from Ruben's soul in front of the entire school, and he could be the one laughing this time.

He saw himself laughing at Vicky Baca. In the vision, he was putting a world of hurt on Ruben, but looking at Vicky Baca while he did it, and laughing.

He was ready. He could share in the power of the horde if he would only give himself over to it. The destruction of Turquoise would be so small in the larger scheme. The colony will live forever, but one day, all the people of Turquoise will be dead.

Some of them were dead already.

He saw his mom, falling off a mountain cliff, the hands of rage having pushed her. She fell forever, the ground always moving away as her body approached, the arc of her fall a continuous curve that never landed, but only spiraled inward. His ears went ahead of him, and followed the spiral arc to its blackened core. He saw a young girl, standing over an ant mound, giving over herself to the rage. Her sound was faint now, the ring of a bell in history, slowly fading, slowly blending inside a larger evil. Kevin listened for the very center of that bell, and changed it.

Mandible jaws had opened to swallow him, but they never arrived. As each demon crossed Kevin's path, it changed from within, transforming to match its new sound in the hum.

He started with that bell, wrapping his mind around it, swallowing it, releasing it as something else. A fading hum of rage, changed in his mind into a solitary flute.

The flute exploded into the hum, flying in all directions, growing stronger as it went, and as the demons crossed a line in physical space, they lost themselves to the hum.

Kevin changed the horde of giant, mutated fire ants into a flock of butterflies. Tens of thousands taking flight, an instant metamorphosis from rage to beauty. When the last demon had changed, Kevin opened his eyes and saw an orange sky, blending into an orange sunset.

## **Chapter 22**

"Have you heard about the video that played on people's coffee machines?" said the nurse. Her breath was look-away intense from her last cigarette break.

"I've heard," said Kevin.

"So what do you think? My friend says it was all a publicity stunt by some guy who used to do talk radio, but I've heard some crazy things today. People are saying something awful happened downtown. People are talking about wild animals running loose or something. My sister's favorite coffee shop was destroyed."

"It's weird," Kevin said. To the nurse he raised his eyebrows. To his dad, sitting in a chair on the opposite wall, he gave a smirk. Of all the people in Turquoise, his dad, having been deep inside Turquoise Mountain when the madness started, was still the most confused person in town.

Joseph and Jackie had carried Kevin to Mission Church, where Jackie called an ambulance. When it arrived, they told the paramedics Kevin had been screwing around on the church's second balcony, fallen to the ground, and broken his legs. Kevin's dad accompanied him on the ride to Turquoise General Hospital, where their story morphed into a tale of a reckless, thrill-seeking teenager who thought he could drop and roll like an expert paratrooper.

The doctor walked in, holding an X-ray sheet in his hand.

"How's your pain level?" the doctor said, nodding at the IV connected to Kevin's arm. When he arrived, the doctor prescribed a dose of morphine to go in the IV. Kevin thought it best to just take it, and not tell them that he could handle the pain just fine.

Now he was wishing he had refused. His mind was foggy. Worse, the hum was off. There was a white noise on top of it all, making it harder to hear the individual component sounds. After two days of wishful denial that he might be a Hearer, Kevin was sad that a drug was interfering with the hum.

"I'm fine," Kevin said.

"We'll need to set the ankle before your surgery tomorrow. Would you like a sedative?"

"No, thank you. Let's just get this over with."

"Alright. This is going to hurt. Hopefully the pain will be something you'll remember the next time you have a stunt like this in mind."

The doctor gave a quick twist and it was over.

"Tough guy, aren't you?" the doctor said. "You barely flinched."

Kevin shrugged.

"Must be the morphine," Kevin said.

The doctor looked skeptical. "I guess so," he said.

They spoke about the surgery Kevin was to have the next morning. Anesthesia, plates and screws in each leg, three weeks in physical therapy, months until he could walk normally again. The doctor left, encouraging Kevin to get a good night's sleep.

"I've always thought it would be nice to make our house accessible to wheelchairs," said Kevin's dad. "We can get started right away."

"I don't need surgery, Dad. I just needed my ankle set. I think I'll be ready to walk in a few hours, max. Get comfortable, and I'll tell you the whole story."

Kevin started with a butterfly landing on an elm tree in Blackstone Park. Three hours later, Kevin signed two consent forms in front of a very confused discharge nurse, and walked out of the hospital, his broken legs completely healed. He called Jackie, and invited her entire family to his house for a late dinner.

They re-lived the events of the past two days over carryout from Turquoise Good Luck Restaurant, Joseph and Jackie giving displays of their unique abilities to still disbelieving parents. When they came to Lou and his unusual broadcast, Kevin asked his dad if he had seen any of it.

"Just a few minutes," said Kevin's dad. "Cassandra showed up at my studio when Lou Sweeney was showing that security footage from his last radio broadcast, the part when the ants came in and demolished his studio. I invited her to come look at the screen. Of course I had no idea what was going to happen. It was a surprise to have Cassandra show up at my studio, but the video on my espresso machine was much more surprising..."

"She acted strange right from the start. She said, 'I don't need to see that video, what I need is for you to come with me, right now.' I asked what was going on and she said there wasn't time to explain, but that it was crucial I come with her this minute. I shushed her, and told her she needed to come look at my espresso machine. She closed her eyes and made the ugliest sound with her throat. Then the hum started screaming in my head. It was terrible. The worst thing I've ever experienced in my life."

Kevin's dad was looking down at the table as he spoke. The color had drained from his face. He took a long drink of water and continued.

“I must have passed out. I remember opening my eyes and I was in a cave, surrounded by giant ants. I was convinced I was in a nightmare. The whole time, I was certain this all was the most vivid, terrible nightmare, and I just had to get through it and wake up. I remember telling myself, you’re a Hearer, you’re brain isn’t normal, this is just another state of development, and when you wake up, you’re going straight to a shrink.”

The table was silent. Mrs. Silver’s hands were over her mouth. Mr. Silver looked utterly baffled and lost.

“She took me to the tree stump. I knew right away that it was the wall I had been hitting when I listened to the hum. She insisted that I break through, and bring her to the other side. I told her I had no idea what she meant. She said she knew I could do it, that she had ways of persuading me. She made the hum scream again. I tried. I tried to do what she wanted, but I couldn’t. I explained to her that I could hear there was another side but I didn’t know how to get there. I didn’t understand what I was supposed to do. She was having none of it. Five times she brought about that horrible scream in my head. I was certain I was going mad.

“Then she said, ‘It’s time to go. For your sake, I hope Kevin does better.’ That was the worst moment of all. I thought she was going to do the same thing to you. I wanted to kill her. But the scream returned and I passed out again. When I woke up, I was in the jaws of a giant ant. That’s when I saw you and Jackie in the cave.”

Jackie was crying. “That hideous, terrible woman,” she murmured.

“She wasn’t a woman anymore,” said Kevin. “She hadn’t been anything like a human for a long time.”

Kevin thought of the young girl in the black and white picture, holding Peter Gerrard’s letter to Julius Adams. That letter had been out in the world for years. Kevin wondered if there were others who had seen it and understood its significance.

“Mr. Browne?” said Joseph. “You’ve had a drink of the sap now, just like us. Do you feel any different?”

Kevin’s dad thought for a minute, then said, “Yes, I do. I thought it might be lingering effects of adrenaline, but it’s been a few hours, and yes, I feel different. Not like I can fly or anything, but good.”

“Do you feel like you can run faster and jump higher?” asked Mr. Silver, his voice tinted as if still in disbelief at all that was told this night.

Kevin’s dad stood up and looked at his chair.

“Let’s find out,” he said.

He squared his shoulders and jumped, clearing the seat. It was a good, athletic jump, but nothing more. Kevin’s dad looked back at the table with a grin. Jackie clapped for him.

“Let’s try it this way,” he said, turning the chair so he faced the tall chairback.

Mrs. Silver cringed. Kevin’s dad bent his knees and jumped.

He wasn’t even close. His knees ran into the chairback, and he tumbled to the floor, the chair coming down with him.

“Are you alright?” asked Jackie.

“I’m fine,” said Kevin’s dad, laughing. “Just fine. I’m glad, actually. I’m too old to go on superhero adventures.”

It was coming on ten o’clock when they finished their meals. Everyone broke open a fortune cookie, and took turns reading their fortunes aloud.

“Something lost will soon be found,” was Joseph’s.

“Take risks only with good odds,” was Jackie’s.

“Get a new car,” was Mrs. Silver’s. This brought a round of laughter from the table.

Kevin read his: “He who laughs last is laughing at you.”

The group, warmed up by Mrs. Silver’s fortune, was in uproar at this one.

Kevin laughed too, but only because he didn’t want to spoil the good mood. The clever joke of his fortune was overshadowed by the memory it wrought. A rock hitting his head, Vicky Baca laughing, as if Kevin’s pain was the funniest thing she had ever seen.

In the instant before he changed the hum, turning demons into butterflies, Kevin had nearly lost himself in anger. It was a strange, unsettling feeling. As he was trying to change their sound, they were trying to change his. They almost succeeded. Had he allowed his own anger to flow any further into the hum, he would be gone now. He was sure of it.

He had seen Cassandra inside the hum, a young girl named Gretchen Brinkley, full of anger herself. She had been tied so closely to her demons that her presence remained in their sound. Kevin had only sensed it for a second, but it was enough. He felt like he knew her. He felt pity for her.

The laughter died down, and everyone took their plates to the kitchen. Kevin's dad began loading the dishwasher.

"Let us get that," said Jackie. "You've had a tough day, Mr. Browne. You go sit. You too, Kevin."

"Okay, well, let me make some espresso first," said Kevin's dad.

"We can do that too," said Mr. Silver. "Provided your Tingley machine doesn't come to life and announce the end of the world."

Kevin and his dad went to the living room and sat on the sofa. A hint of fumes tickled Kevin's nose, reminding him that Cassandra was in this living room the night before. Rather than telling his dad about the change she sensed in Kevin, she asked if he sensed it too.

*Kevin's aura was glowing like the sun. I could hear it when he came in.*

"Dad, what about the hum?" Kevin asked.

"It's different, now," said his dad. "It's funny. The hum is louder in my mind than it's ever been before, but for the first time in years, it doesn't bother me. It's like...if I just accept it, it blends in with everything else."

"Or everything else blends in with it," Kevin offered.

"Yes, even better. Everything blends inside the hum. I understand it now. There is an energy to things, to everything. You and I can sense it. All that energy blends together, and rings in our minds."

"I wanted to tell you last night," Kevin said. "I don't know why I didn't."

"It's alright. I feel like everything happened the way it was supposed to."

The sounds of grinding coffee beans came from the kitchen.

"They're grinding it too coarse," said Kevin's dad. "Come on, Kev. We need to teach our guests the proper way to enjoy espresso."

Kevin's dad charged into the kitchen and took over the operation at the Tingley 2000, serving up six frothing cups of espresso when he was done.

"Are we going to hear from Lou Sweeney again?" he asked, giving Kevin the last cup. "I'd like to congratulate him in person on his amazing espresso machine."

"I don't know," said Kevin. "I don't know if they got away. I never saw them on the mountaintop."

"Joseph sent Lou a text message," said Jackie.

"I haven't heard back," said Joseph.

The Tingley 2000 beeped once. A new message lit up its display screen. "Love to boast? The perfect espresso roast is great for a toast."

Jackie raised her cup.

"To Lou Sweeney," she said. She turned to Joseph and said, "The truth..."

"Wherever it takes us," said Joseph.

## Chapter 23

Despite their late night, his dad encouraged Kevin to go back to school the next morning.

"I'm going back to the studio," his dad said. "You do whatever feels right, but I think it'd be good for both of us to do something normal."

Kevin made it to campus, but not to first period. A woman was waiting for him at the door to his classroom.



“Kevin Browne?” said the woman. She had short brown hair and thick glasses.

“Yes?”

“I’m Ms. Wainwright, the vice principal for your class. I need to see you in my office, now.”

“Of course you do,” said Kevin, wishing he had stayed home.

Kevin’s nose caught the scent of strawberries the minute he entered the administrative building. The scent grew stronger as they approached and they arrived in an office that might well have been a vat of strawberry jam for how it smelled. There was a blonde woman seated next to Ms. Wainwright’s desk. The smell came from her.

“Kevin, have a seat,” said Ms. Wainwright, pointing at a chair next to Strawberry Woman. “This is Suzie from the state truancy office. She’s going to ask you some questions. It’s imperative that you tell her the truth. I promise you it’s the best thing you can do for yourself now.”

Ms. Wainwright closed the door, leaving Kevin alone with Strawberry Woman. It was all Kevin could do to keep from laughing at the phrase “tell the truth.”

“Kevin Browne,” Suzie began, “According to school records, you missed all your afternoon classes on Monday, and all your classes yesterday. Is that true?”

“Should I have a lawyer or something?” Kevin asked.

“No. You should answer my questions. Now, I’ll ask again. Did you miss--”

“Don’t bother, Miss...”

“Suzie. My name is Suzie. Why shouldn’t I bother?”

“I know a warrant was issued for my arrest yesterday. I know I’m being chased by a secret agency who apparently has the power to wipe my name out of existence if they want to. I know investigators have been going through all the attendance records of the schools in the area because three teenagers were at the explosion site on Turquoise Mountain. I think I’m going to leave now, and ask my dad to hire a lawyer.”

Kevin stood up.

“Wait, Mr. Browne,” said Suzie. “Please. I’ll be frank with you.”

Kevin’s hand was already on the doorknob, but he stopped to listen.

“How do you know all these things?” Suzie said.

“I got a phone call yesterday from someone I trust,” Kevin said. “He told me.”

“And who was this person?” said Suzie.

“I thought you were going to be frank. If you’ve just got more questions--”

“Alright, I understand. Kevin, I’m not from the state truancy office. I work for the federal government. I work for an agency that investigates...I...I spend a lot of time in Roswell. I know a lot about the Turquoise Hum, and I know that this explosion in the side of Turquoise Mountain was a major event to a lot of people here. I rushed up to investigate myself. My agency took over the investigation yesterday morning. Yesterday evening we made our first arrival at the site. We found all the police caution tape torn away. We found the ground covered in footprints, like a herd of wild animals went into the cave.”

Came out, actually, Kevin thought.

“Late last night, my team and I went deep inside the cave at the explosion site. What we found down there was very interesting.”

Kevin sighed. His life was about to become much more complicated. He walked back to his chair and sat.

“Did you happen to see the unusual broadcast that played on everyone’s coffee machines yesterday?” Suzie asked.

“Espresso machines,” Kevin corrected.

## Chapter 24

Suzie released Kevin just as third period ended. She gave him a business card and told him to call if he thought of anything he wanted to tell her. She told him that, one way or another, he could expect to be in touch with her again soon.

Kevin pulled his cell phone from his pocket and began a text message to Jackie.

*The government found me. A woman was waiting for me when I got to school. She quizzed me all morning. Didn't tell her anything. She's from a secret agency that investigates the paranormal. She went down the caves last night, found the remains of giant termites and ants.*

He pressed the Send button with his thumb. Something happened in the hum. At first he thought he was hearing his own text message flitter into a cell phone transmission, but the sound continued, and took on an emotion. Anger. It had started as a blip in the hum, but had grown into a jolt of anger vibrating toward his own sound. Then it was an actual soundwave, something cutting through the air behind him.

It was a rock. Flying toward Kevin's head.

In one continuous movement, Kevin turned his body and raised his left hand to swipe the rock from the air.

"W'oh! Freshman's fast today!" said Ruben with a grin.

A line of students stopped behind Ruben and fought for the best places to see what was happening. It amazed Kevin how quickly an audience formed for these confrontations. Another day, another fight, another crowd to watch. Kevin scanned the crowd, looking for people he knew. He was most interested in finding Vicky Baca.

*Watch and laugh, Vicky, he thought, today's show has a different ending.*

As he scanned the crowd, he became aware of a recurring pattern. Every time he connected with a pair of eyes, the eyes turned away. No one was willing to look at him.

He could hear every student in the hum. Their sounds mixed together, shifting, muted, confused. A sadness came over Kevin. What happened in this courtyard two days before could have gone differently. Something about the school, the students, the pressures of fitting in, the search to find a place – something about it all had come together and made otherwise good people act like monsters. He had been laid out in the dirt that day, and they all had just stepped over him, left him there to moan in agony while they went to their next class.

He could hear it happening again. In these seconds of uncertainty, a fistfight either to begin or get defused, his classmates were actively suppressing their own sounds in the hum, forcing them all to blend together. They raced to hide their own feelings, to be cool, to conform to the will of the group, like a colony of ants.

"Didn't see you yesterday. Where you been, boy?" said Ruben. "The hospital?"

Kevin smirked. *If only you knew, Ruben.*

He heard his own sound. The solitary note on a trumpet. It was going loud and sharp with anger.

"I had to take the day off," he said.

"It's what you get for sucker punching me," said Ruben.

"Yeah, I guess it is," said Kevin.

Ruben made a clicking sound with his tongue, and started walking. As he passed, Ruben banged shoulders with Kevin, a final taunt to see if Kevin wanted to go again. Kevin stood still and let Ruben pass. Vicky Baca giggled.

Ruben took a few more steps, and the crowd dispersed, a few students visibly disappointed that the fight wouldn't happen.

Kevin's cell phone buzzed with an incoming text message from Jackie.

*Can you come to our house? We have news too.*

The bell rang. Class would begin in two minutes. The courtyard cleared.

"It's like I'm just not meant to go to fourth period," Kevin said to himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What did you tell her?" Joseph asked.

"I said I didn't know anything, and I wouldn't tell her what I was doing on Monday afternoon until I'd spoken with a lawyer."

"Good job, Kevin," said Joseph.

"And she just let you go?" said Jackie.

"Yes, but I know there were people trying to follow me," Kevin said, smiling. "There was one person on foot, and there were others in a car."

"What kind of car?" asked Joseph.

"A black Neptune," said Kevin, realizing as he said it that they had seen a black Neptune before. When they chased the butterfly to Turquoise Mountain, a black Neptune had been driving in their direction along Highway 150.

"Interesting," said Joseph.

"It took me less than a minute to lose them all," Kevin said. "Suzie's going to hear from her spies that I can run really fast, faster than I should be able to, but she's not going to hear where I went. She's going to be a nuisance, I think."

"Things are about to get more complicated for her," Joseph said. He handed Kevin a phone.

"It arrived this morning," Joseph said.

On Joseph's phone was a text message:

*Hello, Joseph. We are alive and well. After you dropped us off on the mountainside, I realized we were just a short hike away from The Dunce Cap. I was excited that my first journey in the outside world would be to fulfill a dream. I've always wanted to see The Dunce Cap. We were on top of the mountain when we saw the demons come out and charge at Turquoise. We saw it all, including the amazing transformation of demons to butterflies. Kevin will have to tell us all about it, perhaps in an exclusive interview to a worldwide audience some day. Speaking of which, make sure your television is on today at noon. Amy has cracked the security codes in The Dunce Cap's transmitter, and we have something special planned. Thank you again for all you've done. Lou.*

"Good grief, what's he going to do now?" Kevin said, giving Joseph back his phone.

Joseph shrugged.

"Shall I make us some espresso?" Jackie said with a laugh.

"Have you seen his other video on the Internet?" said Joseph. "The video he played on the espresso machines yesterday is out there now. It's all the buzz."

"No, I haven't watched," said Kevin.

Joseph pressed some buttons on his phone and handed it back to Kevin. On the phone was an Internet video player, with a video cued up. The title bar read, "Lou Sweeney Returns On Turquoise Espresso Makers." A black screen faded to a gray wall behind Lou Sweeney in a suit:

*"When you last heard from me it was on the radio, now some five years in the past. I told the world of a small town named Shuberville, and a little girl whose life went terribly wrong..."*

"Watching this makes me nervous that monsters are going to crash through the walls," Kevin said.

"I felt the same thing," said Jackie. She put her chin on Kevin's shoulder and watched the video with him.

The security camera footage, The Demon Queen of Shuberville, the picture of Gretchen, photos of life in Shuberville.

"This is when we left," Jackie said.

*"I was in Vicksburg when it happened,"* said Tom, speaking directly into the camera, his eyes swollen with tears. *"My uncle owned a pest control business, and I went to work for him that summer."*

*One night, out of the blue, my momma showed up, all in pieces. She was rambling, not making any sense, going on about monsters destroying Shuberville. The poor woman had been through hell."*

The video went back and forth between Tom and black and white stills of life in Shuberville.

*For some reason, they let my momma go, but only for a little bit. The demons came to Vicksburg the next night and killed the rest of my family while I was out on a job. That was their way. One by one, everyone I ever knew disappeared in the night. Soon enough, anyone who knew anything about Shuberville was gone. My home town became a legend. Imagine that, your own home town wiped out, and the only time people speak of it, they speak like it wasn't even real. All that's left of Shuberville are these pictures I managed to gather.*

The camera showed spray paint graffiti on cement wall that read, "The Demon Queen is Coming."

*I went into hiding. Those bugs chased me up and down the Gulf Coast. I learned the smell of pesticide confuses them. That's the only reason I'm still alive.*

The camera cut back to Lou, sitting in front of the gray wall. The scrollbar at the bottom showed that the video was nearly finished.

*The Demon Queen thrives on fear, living in secret, plotting something terrible, and killing anyone who suspects too much, who asks too many questions. We've followed her trail to Turquoise, New Mexico, where she has engaged in secret activity for years. We don't know what she wants, but we know she must be exposed. So now I ask you, citizens of Turquoise, to keep your eyes and ears open, to share this story with everyone you know, to live bravely, and seek out the truth, wherever it takes us. I'm Lou Sweeney. Good night.*

Kevin handed the phone back to Joseph.

"It's almost noon," he said.

Joseph turned on the TV to a network news show.

"Lou didn't tell me which station we're supposed to watch," said Joseph.

"That makes me even more nervous," said Jackie.

The clock chimed on the hour. The television signal was lost, and snow filled the screen.

"Here we go," said Jackie.

The snow turned to empty blackness, and faded in to the same gray wall. Lou Sweeney appeared, his hair disheveled, his eyes red and weary.

"Greetings world. My name is Lou Sweeney. Yesterday I changed history with the release of the name of The Demon Queen of Shuberville. That broadcast, originally airing on Tingley 2000 machines in Turquoise, New Mexico, is now available on the Internet at [www.LouSweeney.com](http://www.LouSweeney.com)."

"He's a good promoter," Joseph said. "You have to give him that."

"But what's he going to promote?" Jackie said.

Joseph pressed the Channel Up button. Lou was on the next station too. Joseph flipped stations again.

"He's on every channel," Joseph said.

"He said 'Greetings World,'" said Jackie.

"Please don't let him say our names," said Kevin. "No one's going to believe this story, Lou. Please just leave our names out."

"Yesterday's broadcast led to events that are hard to comprehend, but important to understand," said Lou.

"Here it comes," said Kevin. "He's going to say our names to the entire world. We're screwed."

"The story I have to tell you is crucial for a complete understanding of the planet we live on, of the powers that be, of the things unknown. To tell you this story, I have pirated the airwaves of the world's

most important radio tower, giving me access to communication satellites in space. Ladies and gentlemen, what you are seeing is airing live on every station in the world.”

“Holy cow,” said Jackie. “He’s nuts.”

“He’s brilliant,” said Joseph.

“We’re screwed,” said Kevin.

“Our story begins with a drink. Young people and an innocent drink. Young people not knowing or understanding the ramifications of what they are putting in their mouths.”

Kevin felt betrayed. He remembered the boat ride in the caves under Turquoise Mountain. They had told Lou their entire story. Now he wished they hadn’t. Lou was about to tell it to the world, starting with the sap in Blackstone Park.

“The drink is Diet Spikey’s. The victim is humanity.”

Jackie burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” said Joseph.

“Are you kidding me?” Jackie shouted. “Lou pirated The Dunce Cap, he has the whole world at his fingertips, and he’s going on his rant about diet cola?”

“The Diet Spikey’s Conspiracy is important,” said Joseph. “This is huge!”

“What’s the Diet Spikey’s Conspiracy?” asked Kevin.

“Just more Lou Sweeney hogwash,” said Jackie between laughs. “If this is all he talks about, we’re off the hook.”

It was all he talked about. For ten minutes, Lou outlined a plot by world governments to “brainwash and subjugate the populace” using malicious ingredients in a popular diet soda. He showed screenshots of intercepted emails that made no sense, satellite photos that were blurry and dark, alleged memorandums passed around the power players in Washington, New York, London, Moscow, and Beijing. With every word from his mouth, Lou came across as increasingly more odd.

It occurred to Kevin that this broadcast was the best thing Lou could have done for them. By the time it was over, no one would take Lou Sweeney seriously, and yesterday’s video on the Tingley 2000 would be just another crackpot story on the Internet, regardless of what some people in downtown Turquoise might think they saw.

“Do you guys suppose that Lou is doing this on purpose?” said Kevin. “Discrediting himself to protect us?”

“He’s not discrediting himself,” said Joseph. “This is important information that the world needs to hear. I’m surprised at you guys. All that’s happened in the past two days has vindicated Lou. He was right all these years! We should be hanging on his every word.”

Jackie was still laughing. “I love you guys,” she said. “You both are so sweet, in your own ways. I’m pretty sure that this broadcast is just what it appears to be. A crazy rant.”

Kevin’s cell phone rang. It was his dad.

“Hi Dad....Yes, I’m watching it....I’m at Joseph and Jackie’s house...I left school, it’s a long story. There was this woman – oh, she called you too...she’s going to be waiting for us at home, I think.”

On the TV, Lou was outlining a series of steps that ordinary citizens needed to take. The first one was to boycott Diet Spikey’s soda.

“Maybe you should come over here, Dad....be careful, someone might try to follow you.”

Lou thanked the world for listening, and closed by saying, “We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.”

“Okay, Dad. See you soon.” Kevin turned off his phone.

“My Dad’s coming over,” he said. “I’m worried that Suzie is waiting for us at our house.”

“Well, do you guys want to stay here for a bit?” said Jackie.

“Maybe we all should leave,” said Joseph. “Go into hiding.”

“You’d love that,” said Jackie. “It’s your lifelong dream to be a fugitive on the run, subverting the powers that be.”

“You know it,” said Joseph.

“No hiding, but thank you,” said Kevin. “I’m thinking I’ll try to cut some sort of deal with this woman. She gets the truth; I get left alone.”

“How are you going to do that?” said Jackie.

“I’m still working it out in my head,” said Kevin. “But before I speak with Suzie again, there’s something I want to do with my dad.”

## **Chapter 25**

Starting their trip at Joseph and Jackie’s house, they followed State Highway 150 to the mountain, and parked the car in the empty lot at the end of the road. A nature trail led through the foothills. They spoke little as they hiked.

Lower-altitude underbrush quickly gave way to mountain forest. Kevin’s ears picked up the sound of running water miles before they found it, and following the sound, they took a more direct route than the last time. They crested a small hill and came upon the stream.

They followed it into the valley. There weren’t any butterflies on the cottonwood tree on this afternoon, but its leaves were just beginning to change, and it remained a stunning sight.

“I can hear her,” said Kevin’s dad.

“I know,” said Kevin. “I can too.”

They sat on the riverbank among the exposed roots of the tree. They closed their eyes and listened.

Lost in the hum, breaking the sound into its components, focusing on the flute, Kevin felt something tickle his earlobe. He opened his eyes. A butterfly stood on his shoulder.

THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Spencer Baum is the author of the novels *One Fall* and *The Demon Queen* and *The Locksmith*. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with his wife and children. His web site is <http://www.spencerbaum.net/>.