



Christopher Pike: Spooksville #13 — Alien Invasion

One

Adam Freeman sat in science class and waited for the teacher to arrive. It was the first period of the first day of school. But Adam was not uneasy because he had two of his best friends on either side, Sally Wilcox and Cindy Makey. Sally had lived in Spooksville all her life, but like himself, Cindy was a newcomer to town. The three of them had just finished a summer together that would have killed most kids ten times over. But they'd had lots of fun.

Now it was school time.

The three of them were twelve years old; they were each in seventh grade. The real name of their town was Springville but all the kids called it Spooksville because it was such a spooky place. The proper name of their school was Springville Intermediate but the student body usually referred to it as Horror Halls because the teachers were supposed to mark really hard, and because some of the teachers were rather strange.

'I just hope our new science teacher isn't weird,' Sally muttered. She sat on Adam's right and was slightly taller than him, with a dark fringe and a remarkable ability to look angry even when she was having a good time. Sally was an intense young lady. She continued, 'Last year's teacher blew himself up in the middle of an experiment.'

'Were any students hurt?' Cindy asked. She sat to Adam's left and had basically a soft personality — except when it came to dealing with Sally, who drove her crazy. Cindy was Adam's height and had long blonde hair, which was her pride and joy.

'Who knows?' Sally said. 'We lose so many kids every week in this town it's hard to keep track of the statistics.'

'I would think being in school would be safer than hiking all over the back hills and forests,' Adam said, referring to what they had done during the summer. Like Sally, Adam also had dark hair, and a rather strong personality. But unlike Sally, he used his strength to lead his friends in times of crises rather than trying to find them new dangers. Adam was the undisputed leader of the group, but he was also good at listening to other people's opinions. He added, 'After such a wild summer, I'm looking forward to settling down and studying.'

'Those who seek peace in this town are usually the first to go,' Sally said.

'Is that true?' a meek voice asked from behind them.

The three of them turned to find a kid so short and pale it was hard to believe he was twelve years old. He had a large nose — it almost looked as if it had been sewn on — and eyes so wide that they seemed to swallow his eyebrows. He was sitting with his hands folded on his desk top but he appeared jittery. It was a warm day but he was wearing a brown sweater and a long-sleeved white shirt,

'Who are you?' Sally asked.

'George Sanders,' he replied, a little taken back by Sally's brisk tone.

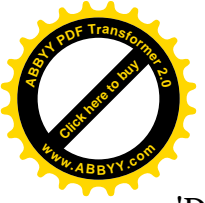
'You just moved here?' Sally asked.

'How can you tell?'

Sally smiled. 'Your face is unscarred.'

George swallowed. 'But you guys don't have any scars.'

'None that you can see,' Sally said. 'But that means nothing.'



'Don't listen to her,' Adam said, offering his hand. 'She just likes to be dramatic. My name is Adam Freeman, and this is Sally Wilcox and Cindy Makey. When did you get here?' George feebly shook his hand. 'A week ago. My family moved here from Los Angeles.'

'And I bet you haven't had a decent night's sleep since,' Sally quipped.

'Shh,' Cindy said. 'Don't scare him.'

'Better he be scared than dead,' Sally replied.

George looked worried. 'That's what I keep hearing, that this town is dangerous. Is it true?'

Adam considered, and decided that this was not the time for total honesty. He was afraid George might burst out crying if he knew everything.

'It depends on your definition of danger,' Adam said.

'Yeah,' Cindy added. 'It's an exciting place. I'm new here as well, like Adam, and we had a great summer.'

Sally counted on her fingers. 'Yeah, we were attacked by a variety of creatures: a witch; a ghost; a Bigfoot; aliens; demons; an evil wizard; dinosaurs; dragons; more aliens.' Sally paused and smiled. 'And that was just one summer.'

George's teeth chattered. 'I don't believe it.'

Sally beamed. 'You sure look like you believe it.'

'Stop that,' Cindy said. 'You don't have to tell him everything at once.'

George spoke to Adam, whom he probably thought the sanest one in their group. 'Did you really run into aliens and witches?' he asked.

Adam hesitated. 'Just one witch, and she's not so bad once you get to know her.'

George paled further. 'I want to go back to Los Angeles.'

'Maybe we could send you back in a box,' Sally said sweetly.

Adam sighed. 'Oh brother. Look, George, it's not as bad as it sounds. Yes, we ran into some weird creatures this summer, but we're still here, aren't we?'

George gulped. 'But how did you survive?'

'By sticking together,' Cindy said.

'That's right,' Adam agreed. 'We have two other friends, Watch and Bryce, and we'll introduce you to them. They're really cool guys and very capable. If you stay close to us, you'll be all right.'

'But when you're alone at night you'll be completely helpless,' Sally said. 'That's when they come for you.'

George's cheek twitched. 'Who?'

'They won't tell you their names,' Sally said darkly.

It might have gone on like that for an hour, with Sally taunting George and Adam and Cindy trying to reassure him. But their science teacher came in right then. He was a funny looking man, thirty-five at most, with wild greasy hair that appeared to have been dyed with an assortment of bargain basement lotions, none of which matched. He wore baggy clothes that seemed on the verge of slipping off him. He even walked funny; he seemed to slide more than stride. Indeed, at any moment, he looked ready to bump into something, a desk or a cabinet, but he didn't. He came in suddenly from the back room and seemed to slither towards the board. Without even speaking he wrote his name for all of them to see, using a thick black marking pen and a style of handwriting that was almost unreadable.

Mr Snakol — the same name listed on their schedules.

Then he turned and faced them and Adam heard George gasp behind him. Mr Snakol had the brightest green eyes Adam had ever seen. And his hands were huge; he could have



palmed two basketballs while eating ice cream at the same time. Not that he looked like he ate ice cream, or anything else so ordinary. Sally leaned over and whispered to Adam.

'This guy looks like a real winner,' she said.

'Quiet,' Adam whispered back. 'We mustn't judge people by their appearance.'

Sally sat back and muttered under her breath. 'Would you judge a rattle snake by its appearance?'

Mr Snakol cleared his throat, and it sounded as if he had something half eaten stuck in it. He smiled widely before he spoke, and it was as if he had not brushed his teeth that morning, or in the last ten years. Yet even though he smiled, his green eyes remained emotionless. His voice came out with a faint hissing sound.

'Hello,' he said. 'My name is pronounced Mr Snakol. I am your new science teacher, and I hope this year to give you an appreciation of science that will last you a lifetime. This year we will be focusing on the biological sciences, and astronomy. It is my feeling that these two subjects are most important for this planet . . . for you students to learn. While studying biology, we will perform many experiments on small creatures.' He paused and scanned everyone in the room with his weird eyes. 'Does anyone have any qualms about performing dissections?'

Sally immediately raised her hand. 'I do,' she said.

'What is your name please?' Mr Snakol asked.

Sally stood. 'Sarah Wilcox, sir. And I absolutely will not perform any dissections, on living or dead animals. I won't even hurt a frog. I am by nature a highly moralistic person and I feel that animals and frogs have as much right to live as people do. Except for cats, I can't stand cats. You know there was once this cat that tried to steal my body. Ever since then I have harboured deep resentment towards all feline creatures. I hate tigers and lions and panthers as well. Those few animals I wouldn't mind dissecting. Bring them in and I'll cut them up, as long as they're dead and shaven. But otherwise I think it is a sin to harm any of nature's creatures. In fact, if you try to force me to cut open a frog, there is an excellent chance I will throw up my breakfast all over my desk. Don't say you weren't warned.' Sally nodded and sat down. 'Thank you, sir, for letting me speak my mind.'

The rest of the class just stared at Sally.

Mr Snakol lost his smile. He appeared uncertain how to respond.

Adam leaned over and whispered to Sally. 'You certainly made a strong first impression,' he said.

Sally beamed. 'First impressions are what count.'

Cindy muttered. 'I think the rest of the class is looking forward to dissecting you.'

'If they cut open your head they'd just find sawdust,' Sally snapped back.

'Better than empty space,' Cindy said.

George swallowed again. 'I don't like cutting into things that bleed.'

Sally turned and faced him. 'Then tell Mr Snakol. Tell him now, and be firm.'

George was uncertain. 'Do I have to?'

'If you feel strongly about the issue, maybe you should,' Adam said.

George raised his hand uneasily. 'Sir?' he said.

Mr Snakol looked over. 'Yes? Please stand and identify yourself.'

George got slowly to his feet, and once there he looked like a slight wind would blow him over. 'I am George Sanders, sir. I am new here and I don't like dissections either.'

Now Mr Snakol looked annoyed. 'If you cannot follow the course I have established, then maybe you should not be in this class. Sit down and remain silent.'



'OK,' George mumbled, and hurried back into his chair. But Sally stood up quickly. 'Excuse me Mr Snake,' she said. 'I mean, Mr Snakol. I don't think you have a right to talk to George that way. You asked for our opinions and he was just giving you his. So what if he doesn't agree with you? This is a free country — he has the right to speak his mind. Personally I feel you owe him an apology.'

Mr Snakol went to snap at her. Then he caught himself and smiled, showing all of his mossy teeth. 'You are right, Sarah Wilcox. I apologise, George. If you don't want to dissect any frogs, it is all right with me.' He paused. 'But I would like the two of you to stay behind after class.'

'I'm afraid I won't be able to do that,' Sally said quickly.

'Why not?' Mr Snakol asked.

'I have an important appointment,' Sally said.

Mr Snakol frowned. 'What is it?'

'It's personal,' Sally said simply, sitting back down. 'I don't want to discuss it in public.'

Mr Snakol appeared dumbfounded. 'Very well. You stay behind George. I want to speak to you about a private matter.'

Sally sighed and whispered under her breath. 'Poor George.'

George trembled in his seat. 'This guy is scary.'

Adam turned once more and patted his arm. 'Don't worry. He's a school teacher. The school administrations would have made sure of his qualifications before allowing him on this campus. You have nothing to worry about.'

'Unless the administration was in on it,' Sally muttered.

They thought it was just another paranoid Sally remark.

But they thought wrong.

Two

At lunch, three periods later, the whole gang gathered in the centre of the campus. The central courtyard was nicely designed, with many benches and trees, and stone walls to lean against or sit on. Yet there was a tombstone in the middle of it all that ruined the pleasant mood. Adam pointed it out and asked who it belonged to. Watch and Bryce Poole, who had just joined them, knew the whole story. Watch was well-known for his thick glasses and his strange habit of always wearing four watches, each set to a different time zone. Bryce was considered by many — himself included — to be a superhero.

'It belongs to Ann Templeton's sister,' Watch said. 'She went to school here, but was killed on that exact spot when she was only twelve years old.'

Adam was stunned. 'I never knew she had a sister.'

'Never talk about her sister in front of her,' Bryce warned. 'The last time someone did around the witch — that person died the next day.'

'I don't think Ann Templeton would kill anyone just for that,' Adam said. He often defended the town witch against personality attacks, largely because she had always been so nice to him.

'I think the guy died choking on mashed potatoes,' Watch said.

'How can you choke on mashed potatoes?' Cindy asked.

'That's my point exactly,' Watch said.

'How did Ann Templeton's sister die?' Adam asked.



'She was murdered,' Bryce said. 'But not by the person who stabbed her with his knife. That was Bill Tompt, but he was not Bill when he killed her.'

'Who was he?' Cindy asked, confused.

'He was possessed by an alien being from an evil sun at the edge of the galaxy,' Watch explained. 'Ann Templeton's sister was named Margie, and she was as powerful as Ann. An ordinary kid could not have killed her. In fact, Ann was so sure it was not Bill who was behind the murder that she didn't even try to punish him.'

'But he died later anyway,' Bryce said.

'How?' Adam asked.

'He was hit by lightning on Hallowe'en night while dressed as a TV antenna,' Watch said.

'He shouldn't have gone out dressed like that during a storm,' Cindy said.

'Oh, there was no storm that night,' Bryce said. 'There wasn't a cloud in the sky. A lot of people thought it was the evil alien who possessed him that came back for him.'

'But why did Ann want her sister buried in the middle of school?' Sally asked. It was unusual for Sally not to know a story about Spooksville's history.

'She wanted her sister to be remembered,' Watch said. 'Personally I think school would be a nice place to be buried.'

'But it's better not to step on the actual place where the body lies,' Bryce warned. 'Friends of mine once sat and ate lunch there and later they developed strange sores all over their bodies that only formed when they went in the sun.'

'I know those guys,' Watch said. 'They now work as extras in vampire movies.'

'Speaking of which,' Sally said. 'I think my English teacher is a vampire. She asked us to write a three page paper by the weekend on what's it like to never see the sun. And she's so pale — she practically glows in the dark.'

'You have Ms Fishshine?' Watch asked.

'Yeah,' Sally said. 'Who do you have?'

'Mr Beard,' Watch said. 'He's real nice. I heard everyone gets an A in his class as long as they don't comment on his bald head.'

'Does he have a beard?' Cindy asked.

'A fake moustache,' Watch said.

Bryce sighed. 'I have Mr Grind for PE. We're in the pool the first six weeks. He makes us wear flak jackets before we get in the water. He's worried terrorists are going to attack any minute.'

'Aren't those jackets heavy?' Cindy asked.

'Yeah,' Bryce said. 'One kid almost drowned this morning. But Mr Grind shrugged it off. He said, when you fight a war, you're bound to lose a few soldiers.'

'Sounds like my kind of teacher,' Sally said.

'Our science teacher is pretty weird,' Adam said. 'His name is Mr Snakol and he looks like a snake.'

'He's new here but I've heard of him,' Watch said. 'He's really into dissections.'

'I heard that he requires at least one dissection per class period,' Bryce said.

'That's him,' Cindy said. 'He gives me the creeps.'

Sally laughed. 'There's this new kid in town named George Sanders. George is what you would call a sensitive soul. Mr Snakol really scared him. Then the teacher had the nerve to make him stay behind.'

'He wanted you to stay behind as well,' Cindy said.

Sally shrugged. 'But I wasn't stupid enough to fall for that line.'



Adam hesitated. 'You don't think Mr Snakol is dangerous, do you?'

Sally laughed. 'I think he's just weird. What is it, Adam? You look worried.'

Adam paused. 'No. It's just that I have been looking for George most of lunch and haven't see him.'

'Then he's probably dead,' Sally said.

'Sally!' Cindy snapped. 'Don't even say things like that.'

Sally giggled. 'I was just joking. So you haven't seen him, Adam. That means nothing.'

'But I told him to meet us here when I said goodbye to him,' Adam said.

'The last time you saw him was before his meeting with Mr Snakol?' Watch asked.

'Yes,' Adam said. 'He was very worried about seeing Mr Snakol alone.'

'I don't blame him,' Cindy said.

'What are you specifically worried about?' Bryce asked Adam. 'That Mr Snakol has harmed him in some way?'

'I wouldn't go that far,' Adam said.

'I would,' Sally said. 'For all we know George has already been dissected.'

'Would you stop that?' Cindy complained. 'We're talking about a young man's life here and all you can do is make your usual sarcastic comments.'

'There is nothing wrong with sarcasm when one knows how to use it properly and in moderation,' Sally said. 'Then she paused. 'We can always pass by Mr Snakol's class at the end of the school today.'

'Would you do that with me?' Adam asked. 'I would really appreciate it.'

'No problem,' Sally said.

'We can all check on Mr Snakol after school,' Watch said. 'In this town, it is better to catch the bad teachers right from the start.'

'Before the bodies start showing up,' Sally agreed.

Three

Unfortunately, at the end of the school day, when they did swing by Mr Snakol's class, there was no one there. The door was locked, in fact, and they had to peer in the windows to see anything. But all they found were empty rows of desks. Adam's disquiet continued.

'I think I'll try to find out where he lives,' he said. 'Make sure he got home OK.'

'But I thought we were going to the arcade,' Bryce said.

'You guys go without me,' Adam said. 'I don't have any extra quarters anyway.'

'If you donate a pint of blood at the door they give you ten quarters compliments of the house,' Sally said.

'If you donate a kidney you get to play all the games you want for a whole night,' Watch added. 'But personally I don't think the games are that good.'

'I can loan you some money,' Sally said. 'If you pay it back to me at a high rate of interest.'

'I can go with you,' Cindy said to Adam. 'I don't much like the arcade anyway. I hate how every game ends with screaming sound effects.'

'Those are real screams,' Sally said. 'They come from the previous owners that they keep chained at the back.'

On that note it was decided that Adam and Cindy would go their separate ways, at least for the afternoon. They planned to get together later that evening and see a movie. The local cinema — which showed only horror films — had a new feature running entitled The Meek



and Mild Massacres. The popcorn was always free but the place charged an arm and a leg for the salt and butter.

On the way home, Adam got the Sanders' address from information. George lived not far from the beach, two blocks from Cindy, who could see the burnt-down lighthouse from her front porch. They were actually the ones who had burnt down the place, while fighting with a ghost. But looking back, after so many other adventures, that had just been another typical day in Spooksville.

A plump woman answered the door. Except for her large nose — which matched George's — she was a pleasant looking woman with short dark hair and large dark eyes that blinked every two seconds. She smiled when she saw him, somewhat innocently, probably not realising that they regularly saved the world from total destruction.

'Yes,' she said. 'May I help you?'

Adam nodded. 'Maybe, ma'am. My name is Adam Freeman and this is Cindy Makey. We are in your son's science class.'

Mrs Sanders beamed. 'That's nice, that George has made friends so quickly.'

'He seems like a cool guy,' Cindy offered.

Mrs Sanders laughed softly. 'I think so. But then, I might be prejudiced. What can I do for you two?'

Adam hesitated. 'Is George here by any chance?'

Mrs Sanders blinked. 'No, not yet. But I would think he would be home soon. How long ago did school finish?'

'Almost an hour ago,' Cindy said, glancing at Adam.

Mrs Sanders frowned. 'I wonder where he could be. I told him to come straight home today.'

Adam spoke quickly. 'I am sure he is fine. Being new here, he might have got lost while walking home. But when he does get here could you have him give me a call? The name Freeman is in the book.'

'I will have him call you as soon as he comes in.' But Mrs Sanders continued to look worried. 'Why did you two stop by?'

'Just to see George,' Cindy said vaguely. 'No other reason.'

'Did George enjoy his first day at school?' Mrs Sanders asked.

Adam forced a smile. 'Yeah. He was having a great time.' He began to turn away. 'Well, we'll be seeing you.'

'It was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs Sanders,' Cindy added, going down the porch steps. But Mrs Sanders seemed distracted, no doubt wondering why it would take her son almost an hour to walk home from a school that was less than a mile away.

'Take care,' she mumbled, before closing the door on them.

As Adam walked Cindy back to her house, he continued to brood over the memory of George's anxious face. 'What an introduction to Spooksville,' he muttered.

'George having to meet alone with Mr Snakol?' Cindy said, but then she smiled unexpectedly. 'Were our introductions any easier? You had to take the Secret Path into an evil dimension and a ghost stole my kid brother right from under my nose.'

'Yeah. But you and I were psychologically prepared for this town. George — he just seems so timid and frail.'

'And you felt you had to protect him?'

Adam hesitated. 'I wouldn't use that word exactly.'

'But it's true. You feel you have to take care of everyone that is not as strong as you.'



Adam waved off her remark, embarrassed. 'I am not so strong.'

Cindy stopped him by touching his arm. She stared him straight in the eye, and Adam had forgotten just how sweet Cindy's eyes were. How large and green. She brushed aside her blonde hair and smiled at him.

'You are stronger than you know,' she said. 'You are a natural hero and a true leader.

Remember how the witch said you have a great destiny? I believe it.'

'She was talking about all of us when she said it.'

'But she was talking to you at the time. She meant for you the most.'

Adam lowered his head. 'We're a team. We're all brave.'

Cindy shook her head. 'Watch may be as brave as you. He is as smart. Bryce is awfully smart too. And Sally is — well, Sally is Sally. But it is you that holds us together.' Cindy paused and squeezed his arm. 'That's why I like you so much.'

Now Adam could actually feel the blood in his face, warming his freckles. He continued to look down.

'I like you too,' he mumbled.

Cindy's tone brightened. 'Do you really?'

Adam glanced up easily. 'Yeah. Of course. You're my friend.'

Cindy smiled again. 'Am I your special friend?'

'Well. I suppose. All my friends are special.'

Cindy lost her smile. 'But . . . you know what I mean?'

'Well. Yes.'

'Yes what?'

'Yes. It's special to have special friends.' Adam swallowed. 'And you are one of them, the special one.'

'What are you trying to say?'

'Nothing.'

'You must be trying to tell me something?'

'No.'

Cindy finally chuckled at his discomfort. 'You're not sure about girls yet, are you, Adam?'

'No. I think girls are nice.'

Cindy laughed out loud. 'I suppose that will have to do for now.' She patted him on the back and headed for her front door, calling over her shoulder. 'Don't worry too much about George. They don't let just anyone become a teacher. Mr Snakol can't be that bad. George is probably down at the arcade, with the others.'

'You're probably right,' Adam called after her.

But he did not believe his own words.

Four

At home Adam had trouble concentrating on his homework. For English he was supposed to write a three page paper describing what he had done over the summer. But he realised if he put down half of the adventures he had experienced, he would be sent to a mental hospital. Also, he kept expecting George to call, but the guy never did. Finally, however, Adam ended up calling George's house. But all he got was George's worried mother. The lady was thinking of calling the police. Adam didn't tell her that going to the police in



Spooksville for help was like expecting the Easter Bunny to show up with jelly beans and chocolate eggs. It just wasn't going to happen.

When Adam met his friends at the cinema, he tried to talk them out of seeing the movie. For the second time he explained his fears, but now he wanted to do more about it than just talk.

'What can we do?' Sally asked, impatient to see the movie. 'We already checked the classroom. There was no one there.'

'We just glanced in the windows,' Adam said. 'There are back rooms connected to that room, where supplies are kept. I want to check there.'

'You want to break in to the classroom, in other words?' Watch said.

'If we have to,' Adam said. 'It is a fact that George has vanished.'

Bryce was thoughtful. 'I have a lock picking kit. We can probably break in without having to wreck a window.'

Cindy was interested. 'Can we run by your house and get the kit?'

In response Bryce pulled a small leather kit from his back pocket. He opened it to reveal an assortment of metal hooks and knives. 'I like to keep it handy in case of an emergency,' he explained.

'And I bet you can pick any lock,' Sally said with a trace of sarcasm.

Bryce nodded with a straight face. 'Yes. Any mechanical lock on this planet.'

'Let's do it then,' Adam said.

Sally was reluctant to miss the movie. 'But what are we looking for?'

'Anything,' Adam said with a note of desperation in his voice.

It was close to sunset when they reached the campus. The shadows were long across the courtyard, and the sounds of their steps echoed through the empty halls. They all crept towards the science room.

'Does this school have any security?' Adam asked.

'A couple of janitors,' Watch said. 'But they're both working on doctorates — online. They should be in the computer room most of the night.'

'I still don't know what we're doing here,' Sally complained.

'I can't understand you,' Cindy snapped. 'George must be in danger. Isn't that enough reason to come to his aid?'

Sally yawned and acted bored. 'I have spent my life rescuing people like George from the evils of Spooksville. I hardly think I am required to rescue one more on my one night off.'

'Shh,' Adam warned as they reached the door of the science room. 'Let's not attract any more attention than we have to.' He nodded to Bryce, who was taking out his kit. 'How long will you need?'

'Five seconds,' Bryce replied as he slid a fine metal wire into the lock, along with a stiff silver hook. He was not exaggerating. A few seconds later they heard the dead bolt slide open. But it was Adam who actually opened the door, carefully. It was very dark inside.

'Maybe I should go in alone,' Adam suggested. 'There is no reason all of us should get in trouble.'

'Good idea,' Sally said. 'If you run into difficulty you can always let out a blood-curdling scream.'

'No,' Watch said firmly. 'We go together or we don't go at all.'

It was decided then. As a group they stepped into the dark classroom. Watch cautioned them not to turn on the light. The place appeared empty but ever so faintly they could hear



a sound coming from the back room. Practically holding their breath, up on their tip-toes, they crept towards the room. Once at the back door they paused and stared at each other.

'There is someone in there,' Adam whispered.

'Or something,' Cindy gasped quietly.

'This is crazy,' Sally hissed. 'We can't just barge in on whoever it is.'

'Why not?' Watch asked softly.

'Let's crack the door slightly,' Bryce suggested. 'See what we can see.'

'I will do it,' Adam said. Taking hold of the doorknob, he slowly turned it and peered through the narrow crack. But the back room was even darker than the classroom. He whispered to the others as he turned his head away from the crack. 'I can't see a thing.'

Bryce paused and listened. 'I don't hear anything any more.'

'I'm not sure we heard anything to begin with,' Sally said.

'No,' Cindy disagreed. 'There was someone in there.'

'Let's just open the door and go in,' Watch said. 'What do we have to be afraid of?'

Many things, they all thought. But Adam let the door slowly open, into a place of blackness, and they stepped inside together, once more afraid to turn on the light, afraid not to. But a few moments of stumbling around in the dark left them no choice — they had to reach for the light switch. Thankfully the light came on and the place was empty.

Except for several cages of frogs and hamsters.

And a pile of bloody clothes in the corner.

Adam knelt with Cindy beside the clothes. There was a brown sweater, and long-sleeved white shirt. Both were stained dark red, but judging from the dryness of the marks, they had been bled on earlier in the day. Adam looked at Cindy — who was ashen faced — and then turned to stare up at the others.'

'We're too late,' he said sadly.

'It doesn't look good,' Sally agreed.

But Watch shook his head. 'A little blood doesn't mean he's dead.' He came and knelt beside them, picking up the stained shirt. 'I am assuming these are the clothes George had on this morning?'

'Yes,' Adam said, still overcome with grief. He kept thinking if only he had checked on George at lunch, the guy would be all right. But for all he knew Mr Snakol had killed George instantly. 'He must be dead. There is no other way to explain how these clothes got here, with these stains.'

But Watch was uncertain. 'What reason would Mr Snakol have for killing George?'

'He doesn't need a reason,' Sally said, and there was anger in her voice now. 'He's just a weird teacher from a weird place.'

Cindy continued to touch George's sweater. 'We have to go to the police.'

'Huh,' Sally snorted. 'What good would that do?'

'Well, we have to do something,' Cindy said desperately.

'Don't panic,' Bryce said. 'Maybe things are not as bad as they seem.'

Just then the door to the classroom slammed shut

Sally stepped over to it, and tried the doorknob. 'Locked,' she gasped.

Overhead the light went out.

The dark was very deep.

'Nobody move!' Adam ordered, standing up and bumping into someone he assumed to be Watch. 'Don't panic!'

'I will panic if I want to!' Sally snapped in an agitated voice. 'I can't get the door open.'



It was pitch black. They could not see a thing.

'Does anyone have a flashlight?' Watch asked.

'I don't,' Bryce said.

'You carry a lock picking kit in case of emergencies and you don't have a flashlight?' Sally said. 'You've got your priorities messed up.'

'Where's your Bic lighter?' Bryce shot back.

'I don't have it,' Sally said.

'Why not?' Cindy demanded.

'I was going to a movie tonight,' Sally said. 'Not to the scene of a murder.'

'Shh,' Adam cautioned. 'Whoever locked us in here must be nearby. We must assume they're listening.'

'It must be that snake-faced Mr Snakol,' Sally hissed.

'But what does he want with us?' Cindy asked.

'He wants our blood,' Sally said. 'He wants our dead bodies.'

'I am glad somebody is keeping a positive attitude,' Watch said.

'We are in no danger as long as we are in here and he is out there,' Adam said.

'Unless he sets the place on fire,' Watch said.

'Please don't give him any ideas,' Sally said.

'Let's stop arguing and figure out a way to get out of here,' Adam said. 'Watch, before the light went off, didn't you see a vent on the ceiling?'

'Yes,' Watch said. 'There is a ventilation duct directly above us. If you guys can help me up, I should be able to crawl through it to the roof.'

'That's a good plan,' Adam said. 'But I'll go through the duct. I'm smaller than you — I won't get stuck as easily.'

'You're so brave, Adam,' Cindy gushed.

'What's there to fear in the duct?' Sally wanted to know. 'I think it's more dangerous to stay here.'

'It is when Adam climbs out of the duct that he will be in danger,' Watch said. 'But let's stop talking and pull a table over beneath the vent. Bryce and I can stand on it beside you, Adam, and lift you up.'

Working in the dark was difficult. Adam felt as if he struggled in a bad dream. The thought of crawling into a tight place — in the dark — made him feel claustrophobic. But he knew someone had to do it. As Bryce and Watch made flexible steps with their clenched fingers, and Adam was hoisted into the air, he just hoped he didn't get stuck in the vent.

Watch had a good sense of the room, even in the dark. The moment Adam was lifted towards the ceiling, he felt the vent directly overhead. He told the others as much.

'Is the grid hard to get off?' Watch asked.

Adam poked at the covering grid and it lifted right up. 'No, it's just pressed on,' Adam said.

'But you're going to have to lift me higher if I am to crawl inside.'

'Be careful, Adam,' Cindy whispered.

'Hey,' Sally said. 'I just thought of something. What if George's dead body is crammed in the ventilation duct?'

'Thank you for mentioning that,' Adam muttered. 'I feel a whole lot better now.'

Cindy sighed. 'He was so young.'

'Like we are ready to retire,' Sally said. 'Hurry up you guys. I don't like standing here and yapping in the dark.'

'You could sit quietly in prayer,' Watch suggested.



They lifted Adam up higher, and he was able to knock aside the vent cover and grab the edges of the metal passageway. Bryce and Watch gave him one last shove, and then he was inside the vent and crawling. But he paused to speak over his shoulder.

'When I get outside, I will come around and open the door,' he said.

'Just don't get killed,' Sally said.

'That is sound advice under any circumstances,' Watch said.

'But do keep an eye out for this weird teacher,' Bryce said. 'He can't have gone far.'

'I will return as quickly as I can,' Adam promised.

He ploughed forward. The vent was a tight squeeze, a square aluminium tunnel. His movements were far from quiet. His hands and elbows and knees were constantly banging the sides. If Mr Snakol was still in the building, he must know what they were up to. Adam remembered what Watch had said, that it was probably better to try to take the vent to the roof. But Adam had to wonder what danger he would face as soon as he was free. Also, thanks to Sally, he couldn't be free of the idea of bumping into George's dead body. After a summer in Spooksville, he was used to dangerous adventures, but he wasn't sure if he would be able to keep from screaming if he ran into George. His guilt over what had happened to the poor kid continued to plague him.

After a minute of crawling he noticed a faint glow up ahead. It came from the roof of the tunnel, but it was not exactly a way out to the roof. As he drew closer he saw that there was a fan between him and the roof. It was bolted down; he wasn't sure how he was going to remove it. But the thought of crawling further through the duct did not appeal to him.

Suddenly he just wanted to get outside into the fresh air. Rolling over on his back, he shoved at the fan with the bottoms of both his feet. In such a position, he was able to use the full strength of his legs. And after riding his bike all summer all over Spooksville, he was surprisingly strong. Plus the motor and fan sounded like old pieces of equipment. A few seconds of shoving on the equipment and there was a loud scraping sound as the fan was pushed out and away.

Fresh air poured into the duct and Adam was relieved.

He quickly crawled out and on to the roof.

The night was quiet. There was no one around.

No one that he could see. But as Adam hurried to the side of the roof, searching for a way down, he realised that it was unlikely that Mr Snakol had simply locked them in and gone off. For that reason Adam was not entirely surprised to see Mr Snakol below him when he peered over the side of the roof.

His science teacher was sitting in front of a small cage filled with two hamsters. As Adam watched in horror, Mr Snakol opened the cage and reached in and withdrew one of the hamsters and held it by its tail above his open mouth. But Mr Snakol had not simply opened his mouth wide. It was as if he had allowed his mouth to expand, until the opening took up over half his face. All Adam could see was a long darting tongue and rows and rows of teeth. As the hamster twisted and turned in fright, Mr Snakol slowly lowered the creature. Adam had to turn away; he could not bear to see any creature killed. But closing his eyes did not prevent him from hearing the faint crushing sound of the hamster's bones and muscles.

And the satisfied slurping sound of Mr Snakol's lips.

Adam forced himself to look again.

The science teacher reached for the next hamster.



Adam realised that this was his chance. While Mr Snakol was feeding, he should be able to circle around and re-enter the classroom and get his friends out of the back room.

Fortunately for Adam, leaning on the other side of the building was a tall tree that was as useful as a ladder when it came to climbing down to the ground. Less than a minute after leaving Mr Snakol, Adam was back at the front door of the classroom. It lay open, and he scampered inside and was able to unlock the back room. But as his friends flooded out, he cautioned them to keep their voices down.

'He's out there in the hallway,' Adam whispered. 'He's eating living hamsters.'

'Gross,' Cindy said, disgusted.

'I told you he was a snake,' Sally said.

'Should we confront him now?' Bryce said. 'It's five of us against one of him.'

'But what are we going to do if we do confront him?' Watch said. 'Taking him to the town police would be useless. They would be more likely to arrest us for breaking and entering than arrest him for the disappearance of George.'

'But we have evidence,' Cindy said. 'We have George's bloody clothes.'

'The police are useless,' Sally said with certainty. 'If the past has taught us anything, we know we have to deal with this by ourselves.'

'We could go to the school administration tomorrow,' Adam suggested. 'With the bloody clothes in hand, we might be able to make a strong case for them to remove Mr Snakol from the school. That won't bring back George but it will keep more kids from being killed.'

But Sally was not encouraging. 'The administration is as useless as the police. They're the ones who hired him in the first place.'

'We can't stand here and argue all night,' Bryce said. 'Let's take the bloody clothes and try to think of something overnight.'

'But what about George?' Cindy asked.

'I think George is beyond our help,' Sally said.

Five

The next morning, before school began, Adam and Cindy sat in the principal's office and tried to convince her that one of their teachers might be an alien monster. Adam and Cindy were alone because — except for Sally — they were the only ones who had followed the course of events from the word go. But Sally had refused to come because she thought the principal was in on Mr Snakol's evil doings.

Mrs Strawberry, Horror Hall's principal, was a curious enough woman. She had a red face, and looked sweet and healthy, especially when she smiled. The only trouble is she never really stopped smiling, even when they were telling her about George's bloody clothes. It was as if she had listened to complaining teachers and students all of her forty or so years and had made the decision to believe everything was either a lie or else funny. At least that's what Adam thought, but he was no mind reader when it came to such people. She almost burst out laughing when they got the part where Mr Snakol ate the hamsters. Adam had to pause to get his bearings.

'I don't understand your reaction,' Adam said. 'We are talking about a missing student. Surely George's mother has called you and explained how her son never came home from school?'



Mrs Strawberry batted her orange eyelashes. 'Yes, she called. She was worried about George.'

'And what did you tell her?' Cindy asked.

'I told her that there was nothing Co worry about She is a young woman. She can have another child.'

'But what about George?' Adam said, exasperated.

'What about him?' Mrs Strawberry asked innocently.

'We told you,' Cindy complained. 'We think Mr Snakol killed him. We've shown you the evidence.'

'But I would not worry about Mr Snakol,' Mrs Strawberry said.

'But we are worried about him,' Adam said. 'For all we know he might try to kill us. I just don't understand how you can sit there and say these things.'

'It is easy for me,' Mrs Strawberry said in a pleasant voice. 'I keep a positive attitude. When bad things happen, I pretend that they have not really happened. I suggest you two do the same.'

'But you're not facing reality,' Cindy said. 'Bad things are going on in your school and you're letting them.'

'But they are only bad if you let them be bad,' Mrs Strawberry said. 'It is all in your attitude. Take for example when George's mother called. The boy has been missing for twenty-four hours. In this town that probably means we will never see him again. I could have got all upset when I heard the news, and sympathised and maybe cried with George's mother. But keeping a positive attitude, I was able to see that everyone has to go sometime.'

'So you told George's mother just to have another kid?' Cindy asked.

Mrs Strawberry beamed. 'Exactly. I was able to focus on what was possible, not what was impossible.'

'But it is possible,' Adam said, 'that if you get rid of Mr Snakol now, the lives of many kids might be saved.'

'That is another thing I won't do,' Mrs Strawberry said. 'It is too negative an act.'

'But he's a murderer!' Adam said strongly.

'But like each of us, he has his destiny to live. If I dismiss him, then I will be tampering with destiny, and that I will never do. Personal destiny is the foundation of this creation.'

'But with that kind of philosophy you'll never do anything,' Cindy said.

Mrs Strawberry smiled. 'I don't have to do anything. I just have to maintain a positive attitude and everything will be all right.'

Adam groaned. 'That is totally ridiculous. What if I were to set your office on fire? Would you just let me?'

'Are you going to set my office on fire?' Mrs Strawberry asked.

'Of course not,' Adam said. 'I was just using that as an example. What would you do?'

'I wouldn't do anything. I would just maintain a positive attitude and everything would be all right.'

'But you could die in the fire,' Cindy said.

'What fire?' Mrs Strawberry asked.

'The one Adam is talking about lighting.'

'But he just said he wasn't going to do it,' Mrs Strawberry replied. 'Children, why search for problems where they don't exist?'



'But Mr Snakol is for real,' Adam said. 'He is dangerous. And you hired him. You are responsible.'

'I refuse to take responsibility,' Mrs Strawberry said. 'And because I refuse to do so, his acts do not affect me. My mind is at peace and my soul is content.'

'But what about George?' Cindy complained.

'What about him?'

'We told you!' Adam screamed. 'He's probably dead!'

Mrs Strawberry gently shook at finger at him. 'See, this is what happens when you don't maintain a positive attitude. You are upset, and for no reason.'

'He has plenty of reason to be upset,' Cindy said, standing in anger. 'You're just a cold uncaring woman. AH your philosophical and psychological babble is nonsense. You are not qualified even to be a principal.'

'I refuse to accept responsibility for my qualifications,' Mrs Strawberry said. 'I am what I am. You are what you are. If George is dead, he is what he is.'

Adam also stood up realising it was hopeless. 'That makes absolutely no sense.'

'It is not my responsibility to make sense,' Mrs Strawberry said.

Adam turned to Cindy. 'Let's get out of here. Sally was right. We're the only ones who can help George.'

Mrs Strawberry also stood up and stretched out her hand. 'I am happy we had a chance to meet. Although you obviously dislike me, I choose to believe we are actually close friends. That way I maintain a positive attitude and I do not feel bad about this meeting.'

But Adam would not shake her hand. 'I feel sorry for you, Mrs Strawberry. One day something difficult will happen in your life and your positive attitude will evaporate like steam in the air. Then you will really be in trouble.'

Mrs Strawberry grinned. 'I will not take responsibility for that day.'

Cindy grabbed Adam's hand and led him towards the door. 'First period is about to start,' she said. 'Should we go?'

'We have to go,' Adam said. 'We have to keep an eye on him.'

Six

During class, Mr Snakol had them break into teams of three for lab. Naturally Adam and Cindy and Sally chose to be together. They gathered at a lab table at the rear of the classroom. Carrying a foul smelling container, Mr Snakol went around the room and gave them each a living frog to dissect, depositing the creatures in a glass bowl. Sally immediately threw a fit, right in the teacher's face.

'I told you I will not perform dissections on poor little frogs!' she yelled.

Mr Snakol stared at her with his bright green eyes. 'Once it is dead it won't feel a thing. And if you don't cut it open, Sarah, then you will fail the lab portion of the class. Then you will have to stay behind class each day until you make up the work.'

Sally met his stare. 'Like George?'

Mr Snakol turned away. 'George is not here today.'

Sally went to say something else but Adam stopped her. 'That was a dangerous move,' Adam whispered as they watched Mr Snakol move to the next group of lab partners. 'You can't just accuse him in public.'

'Why not?' Sally asked. 'What's he going to do? Sue me?'



'We need more proof of what he's done,' Cindy said.

Sally snorted. 'Proof is useless. There is no one in this town to bring it to.'

'Then what do you suggest we do?' Cindy asked.

Sally threw Mr Snakol a scornful look. 'I say kill the monster.'

'We can't do that,' Adam said. 'We do not have absolute proof he killed George. Also, we are not sure if he is a monster.'

'Gimme a break,' Sally said. 'The guy eats living hamsters. You're the one who saw how wide his mouth opens when he's feeding. He can't be human.'

'If he's not human,' Cindy said. 'Then what is he?'

'I suspect he is either from the interior of the planet,' Sally said, 'where there are all kinds of gross creatures. Or else he is from a hellish planet in another galaxy.'

'But what's he doing teaching in high school?' Cindy asked.

'I don't know everything,' Sally said. 'Maybe he just needs a job. Times are tough — it doesn't matter what world you're from.'

'We can't just kill him,' Adam said. 'It wouldn't be right.'

'But what if he kills another kid?' Sally asked. 'Then you'll have that weighing on your conscience. I say we stay after class, lure him into the back room, and stab him with a syringe filled with formaldehyde.'

'No,' Adam said. 'We have to spy on him some more, see what it is he wants.'

'He wants food,' Sally said impatiently. 'We are all meals to him.' She paused and again her eyes went to Mr Snakol. 'I don't want to wait to get rid of this menace.'

'Sally,' Adam warned. 'You're not going to act on your own. It would be too dangerous.'

Sally lowered her head and stared down at the frog that hopped around the glass bowl on their lab table. 'Then I'm going to flunk out of this class because I'm not going to cut open this frog. Can you guys do it?'

Sally had a point.

Just the thought of the dissection made them ill.

When the class was over, Sally pretended to leave with Adam and Cindy. The moment they were out of sight, however, she circled around to the science class. The next period had yet to start. She found Mr Snakol sitting alone in the back room, staring at the pacing hamsters in their small metal cages. She sneaked up on the teacher, startling him when she spoke.

'Trying to decide which one you're going to have for lunch?' she asked.

He jumped in his seat, and then turned to face her. His green eyes seemed to shine, they were so bright just then. 'What can I do for you, Sarah?' he asked in his hissing voice, pushing his wild hair from his face.

'Leave this school and leave us alone,' she said.

He forced a smile, and she saw how sharp his teeth were. 'I don't understand why the dissections upset you so much. They are all in the interest of science.'

'I am not talking about the dissections, although I think they are disgusting and gross and completely unnecessary. I am talking about you personally. But maybe I put that poorly.'

You see, me and my friends know about you. We know you're not a person, but some weird alien creature who eats living hamsters and kills defenceless young boys.'

Mr Snakol lost his smile. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Sally snorted. 'You asked George to stay behind yesterday. By a strange coincidence George disappeared right after that. You were the last person to see him alive. And we



know he's dead because we were the ones who were here last night. The ones you tried to lock in this room. We found his bloody clothes. And they had your fingerprints all over them!

'Did you dust the clothes for fingerprints?'

'No! But we didn't have to. Adam saw how big your mouth gets when you eat hamsters. We all know you're not human, and pretty soon a lot of people are going to know. You're not going to get away with it.'

Mr Snakol slowly stood up. She had forgotten how tall he was. 'Get away with what, Sarah?' he asked in a serious voice.

She stared up at him. 'With whatever it is you're doing here on our planet.'

He stared down at her. His green eyes seemed to grow bigger. 'You think I am from another planet?' he asked softly, still hissing, like a snake.

Right then he did look like an alien.

'Yeah. You're from planet Zeon or something. I know that for a fact, and I'm not alone.'

He stepped towards her. 'Say I am from another planet Say I am responsible for the disappearance of George. What are you going to do about it?'

It was only then Sally realised that no one else had entered the science classroom, just through the doorway. Mr Snakol, she understood, must not have a second period. She was all alone with him, in a closed room. Even if she screamed out loud it was doubtful if anyone would hear her. Adam's warning came back to haunt her. She was in deep danger and she knew it. But she refused to show fear. She had experience with alien monsters.

The moment you showed you were scared, they had you.

'Don't you dare threaten me, Mr Snake Face,' she said defiantly. 'My friends are waiting outside. If they don't see me in a minute, they will break in here in force. And they are used to dealing with monsters like you. You won't last two seconds with them.'

Mr Snakol stepped to the door of the back room, peered into the classroom, and then shut the door and locked it. He turned back to her and she noticed a faint trail of green slime running down the right side of his face. Once more he stepped towards her.

'Your friends seem to have left without you,' he said.

Sally sneered. 'You just didn't see them. They're hiding.'

He took another step towards her. 'I don't think so.'

Sally changed her mind. She decided to take one small step backwards. 'You don't scare me,' she said.

He kept coming. 'You look scared to me. As scared as a human can look.'

Sally froze. 'Who are you? What do you want?'

He smiled, and she saw that he had not one row of teeth, but two. They were shaped like a snake's, pointed and sharp. 'You are right. We are visitors to your world. But as for what we want — I think it would be simpler if I just showed you. Then you will understand everything.'

Sally gulped. 'That's OK. I prefer my ignorance.' She paused. 'I have PE now. Can I go please?'

'No. You're not going anywhere.'

Sally tried to step past him. He blocked her way.

'You don't understand,' she said. 'I can't be late.'

'You don't understand, Sarah. It is already too late.'

Then he took off his face and she did understand.

But it did not keep her from screaming.



Seven

At lunch, the gang couldn't find Sally. That worried Adam.

'She was talking about confronting Mr Snakol,' he explained to Watch and Bryce. 'She promised me she wouldn't really do it, but you know Sally.'

'She can be so stubborn,' Cindy said.

'Or brave,' Watch said. 'It depends on how you look at it. I think we'd better check out that classroom again.'

The four of them hurried over to the science room. But even though the door was not locked, there was no one inside. Not even in the back room where they had found George's bloody clothes. But none of Sally's clothes lay about, and for that they were grateful.

'Is it possible she just went home sick?' Cindy asked.

'Sally gets sick as often as the moon runs into the earth,' Watch said.

'No,' Adam said. 'I think it is more than a coincidence that Mr Snakol is gone at the same time Sally is gone. He must have kidnapped her somehow.'

'And taken her where?' Watch asked. 'That is the most important question to answer. The same for George. We found his bloody clothes, but we found no body. Yet we must assume George was taken in the middle of the school day. Yet I am sure no one saw Mr Snakol carrying a body out to his car and driving away. I don't think he would have been that reckless.'

'I think we have to assume Mr Snakol is an alien of some kind,' Bryce said. 'And has access to technology we can't imagine.'

'Good points, both of you,' Adam said, looking around. 'We have never really torn this room apart. Maybe a few of his fancy devices are still here. Let's search every cabinet, every closet.'

For the next ten minutes that was exactly what they did. In the end they found a strange black box hidden beneath a bunch of papers in a corner closet. Something akin to an uncovered speaker jutted out one side, and on top was a row of coloured buttons and lights. Watch and Bryce studied it for a few minutes and then Watch pushed a couple of buttons. A faint humming sound started, and a wave of blue light projected from the side speaker.

Fortunately it was not pointed towards any of them.

But standing in the path of the beam was a hamster cage, with a hamster inside. It sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow for a moment before disappearing. The wave of blue light vanished. Watch and Bryce let go of the device.

'Did you see that?' Cindy gasped. 'That light vaporised that poor hamster.'

'Not necessarily,' Watch said.

'This device could be used for transporting objects,' Bryce said. 'We may have just sent the hamster to another location.'

'But to where?' Adam asked.

'I have no idea,' Watch said, reaching for the buttons again. 'But it might be possible to bring it back.' He fiddled with the controls for a moment and once more the wave of blue light shot out from the speaker-like apparatus. In a shower of colours the hamster and cage reappeared.

Only the hamster was not moving.



They gathered around it, and waited.

But the poor animal was dead.

'Why would the transporter kill it?' Adam asked.

'I don't think it was the transporter that killed it,' Watch said.

'I agree,' Bryce said. 'It was probably the place it was transported to that killed it I suspect we just sent the hamster into outer space, and then brought it back.'

Cindy grimaced. 'You mean we suffocated it?'

Bryce was grim. 'Yes. But we didn't know.'

'Not to sound cold,' Watch said, 'but it was better it was the hamster than us. Its death may have saved our lives.'

Adam thought he understood what Watch was saying. 'Is that because you think Mr Snakol used this device to take away George and Sally? Or because you plan on using it to go after him?'

'Both reasons,' Watch said. 'We must go after them. Do we have a choice?'

'But we will need the coordinates of the alien ship,' Bryce said. 'Obviously the transporter has not been left locked on to the ship.'

'Probably as a safety precaution,' Watch said, 'to keep people like us from accidentally or intentionally beaming aboard the ship.'

'You are both assuming there is a ship in orbit,' Adam said. 'Should we make that assumption?'

'It seems logical,' Bryce said. 'In fact, I bet the ship is in a stationary orbit above Spooksville.'

'That is assuming that Mr Snakol is the only alien that has infiltrated or planet at this time,' Watch said. 'But for all we know there could be hundreds of them in all walks of life. If that is the case, there is no reason to believe the ship remains directly above us. But, for the time being, I prefer to think you are right, Bryce. Tonight, when it is dark, I might be able to locate the alien ship in one of my telescopes.'

'And that will give you the coordinates to set the transporter?' Adam asked.

'Two out of three of the coordinates,' Watch said. 'Just seeing the ship will not tell us how far away it is. But I think we will be able to experiment with the distance. We can beam something towards it, see if it comes back alive.'

'No!' Cindy protested. 'We can't just kill a bunch of hamsters. There must be another way.'

'I will think about it,' Watch said.

Adam carefully touched the transporter. 'I don't like waiting until tonight. Sally could be dead by then.'

'We have no choice,' Bryce said.

'And Sally is not so easy to kill,' Watch added.

Eight

The first thing Sally saw when she regained consciousness was George's worried face. The second thing she saw was the planet earth. It was behind George, just outside the window. In a rush she realised that she was aboard a space ship, circling her world. Sitting up quickly, the blood rushed to her head and she felt as if she might faint. George put a steadying hand on her shoulder.

'Are you all right?' he asked anxiously.



'Of course,' she said brushing his hand off. 'I have been in outer space before. This is nothing new for me.' She glanced around. They were not chained in any way, but their room was relatively small, and she suspected that the door was locked. On top of everything else, she had on a white robe instead of the blue dress she had worn to school that morning. George wore the same. But at least she still had her own underwear on. She added, 'How did I get here?'

'Mr Snakol brought you in,' George said. 'That was hours ago. He just laid you down on the floor. You have been sleeping ever since.'

'I was not sleeping. I was knocked unconscious from the brutality of his unwarranted attack.'

George was surprised. 'Really? He didn't try to hurt me.'

Sally straightened and then leaned back against the wall. The floor was covered in grey carpet. The walls were also grey but the material felt more like plastic than wood. The only light was from the earth below. The alien craft seemed to be hovering two hundred miles above the Pacific Ocean and the West Coast. The sea was still bright but it looked as if night had come to Spooksville. She must have been out more than just a few hours. She wondered if they had performed horrible experiments on her body while she was unconscious. It was a disturbing thought, but she wouldn't have put it past them. She had seen what Mr Snakol really looked like — some kind of lizard monster from the dark side of the galaxy. She did have a small bandage on her right arm, right beside the vein.

'Tell me what has happened to you since we last saw you,' Sally said.

'You know that Mr Snakol asked me to stay after class. The moment everyone was gone he led me into the back room, and before I knew what was going on he locked the door. Then he had me sit down and he brought out a needle. He said he needed just a little of my blood for an important experiment he was performing.'

'You let him stick a needle in you?' Sally said. 'What kind of wimp are you?'

'I didn't just let him do it. I knew it wasn't right, that he wasn't a doctor. I put up a fight but he pinned me down, and you can't believe how strong he is. But the first syringe of blood he drew — I was able to knock that aside. It broke all over my clothes. You can't imagine what a mess it made.'

'Actually, I can imagine,' Sally said flatly. 'Go on.'

'He finally got his test tube of blood out of me. He studied it in some kind of microscope he had, but it wasn't a normal microscope. Then he said I checked out, that my blood was OK and I could go with him to his ship. Of course I told him I didn't want to go anywhere, but he ignored me. He threw me this white gown and told me I had to wear it on the ship so that we didn't bring a lot of germs there. Then, after I put it on, he pulled out some kind of funny black box and pushed some buttons and suddenly we were here.' George paused. 'I have been here ever since. They tried to feed me, but all they have are frogs and hamsters.'

'You say they. Is there more than one of them?'

'Oh yeah.'

'How many?' Sally asked. 'Exactly?'

'I don't know. Not many, I think. After I was teleported here, when I was being led to this room, I saw maybe six Lizzies.'

'Lizzies? Is that what they call themselves?'

George nodded. 'Yes. Mr Snakol says they are from a far away world, but that their world is dying.'

'So they want our world?' Sally demanded.



George hesitated. 'He didn't say that exactly.'

Sally stood. 'But that is what they want. They are invaders. They have to be destroyed. It is either us or them.' Sally pulled George to his feet and put her hands on her shoulders.

'George, it's up to us. We have to save the world. If we succeed the future generations of mankind will remember us as the greatest heroes of all time. But if we fail, millions of years of enslavement and torture will ensue.'

'Really?' George said.

Sally let go of him and walked around the room. 'I have seen alien monsters like this before. Not exactly the same but close enough. They have no mercy. They worship evil. The only thing they respect is brute force.'

'Did Mr Snakol really knock you out?' George asked.

Sally rubbed her head. 'George, I didn't just decide to take a nap in the middle of the day.' In reality, she had fainted after seeing his lizard face and the needle he was about to stab her with. Of course, she didn't want George to know that. It didn't sound like he had fainted, but put up a good fight. Maybe he had more guts than she realised.

'But how can we stop them?' George asked.

Sally pressed on the door. There was no obvious knob.

'Do you know how to open this?' he asked.

'I think it's locked.'

Sally took a step back from the door. 'When was the last time Mr Snakol was here?'

'A while ago. When he brought you in.'

Sally reached down and tore off a portion of the hem of her white gown. 'I bet if we make a lot of noise, someone will come,' she said.

George was puzzled. 'Why are you tearing that cloth?'

'You'll see. Just follow my lead. We're going to make a lot of noise, and then, whenever who comes in, we're going to attack them.'

George shook his head. 'I told you how strong they are. It would be a waste of time.'

'Listen,' Sally said. 'You're new to Spooksville. You don't know how to handle these kind of situations. Me — I'm an old pro. Just do what I say and you'll be a hero.'

George was nervous. 'But I don't want to be a hero. I just want to go home.'

'Like these lizard monsters are going to deliver you back to your front doorstep. You have to get a grip on yourself, George. This is reality. These are evil aliens. If we don't escape quickly, they will eat us alive. And they'll probably eat you first.'

'Why me?'

'Because you look more tender than me. We're going to start screaming now. When someone appears, just follow my lead. Don't be afraid.'

George nodded. 'Just don't get us killed.'

'Death is an old friend of all of us who have grown up in Spooksville,' Sally said.

They started screaming. Within a minute a Lizzie — neither could tell if it was Mr Snakol or not — appeared. His face was green and ugly. He looked like a swamp lizard on steroids. He had claws instead of hands and a sickly green fluid dripped from his open mouth. He wore a tight silver suit but did not seem to be carrying any weapons. Seeing he was unarmed, Sally wasted no time. She literally threw herself at him.

He threw her back at George.

The two landed in a pile and the Lizzie left.

'That did a lot of good,' George mumbled, rubbing his head.



Sally staggered to her feet. The Lizzie had been as strong as George said. There was no way they were going to be overcome by hand to hand combat. But perhaps that would not be necessary. Sally smiled when she saw the small white piece of cloth jammed in the door. She had thrown it towards the door the moment she had leapt at the Lizzie. Now she just hoped it would be enough to allow them to open the door. Kneeling beside it, she gestured to George to come close.

'I am assuming this door must seal to lock,' she said. 'We might be able to push it open. On the count of three, push as hard as you can in the direction it slides when it opens.'

'Wait,' George said. 'What are we going to do when we get out of here?'

'Take command of the ship and fly it down to Washington DC. There we will turn it over to the President of the United States and in return for our heroic work we will be awarded the Medal of Honour and hopefully a large gift of cash from the Congress.'

'But how are we going to take over the ship?' George asked.

'George,' Sally said patiently. 'You ask too many questions. When you're in situations like this, you just have to wing it. OK? Now I am going to count to three and you and I are going to push. One . . . Two . . . Three!'

Sally had been right. The door was no longer locked.

It slid open and the alien ship waited for them to conquer.

Nine

Watch had an assortment of three telescopes, each of a different design. One was a large Newtonian, equipped with a mirror he had ground by hand in his garage and a forty centimetre thick aluminium tube he said he had moulded from scrap. It was attached to a concrete and steel mount that seemed to be a permanent part of his back garden and there was a clock drive that moved it in line with the stars.

Then he had a smaller refractor, which held a lens at the tip, and which he mainly used, he said, to take pictures of the planets. Finally he had a smaller telescope which was really more of a large-scale pair of binoculars, but with only one half of a body. He said he used it to search for comets. They were all impressed by his equipment, even Bryce.

'You must spend a lot of time out here at night?' Bryce asked.

'I am out here almost every night,' Watch said, fiddling with the smallest of the telescopes. It was already dark and the stars overhead were bright. Cindy gestured to his unlit house.

'Is anyone at home right now?' she asked. They had not gone through the house, but had just come round the sides.

'No,' Watch said. 'No one is at home.'

The way he said the words it was clear he didn't want to be asked any more questions in that regard. That was OK — Watch deserved his privacy and they had pressing business at hand. Taking a number of sightings in the smallest telescope, Watch then stepped to the large refractor and focused it on a point in the sky almost directly overhead. He changed the eyepiece on the instrument a few times before he spoke next, holding his thick glasses in his free hand. Then he just relayed his discovery in a normal tone of voice.

'I think you were right, Bryce,' he said.

'You have located it?' Bryce asked.

'Yes.' Watch put on his glasses and stepped back from the telescope. 'You guys can have a look, but it's nothing impressive. It looks like another star in the centre of the field of view.'



But I know the sky backwards and forwards. It is not a star. The alien vessel is parked in a stationary orbit directly above Spooksville.'

They each had a peek at the object, but Watch was right. It looked like any other bright star. Yet Adam thought he detected a faint oval shape to it, although it may have been his imagination.

'How far away do you think it is?' Bryce asked Watch.

Watch was uncertain. 'Ordinarily, because it seems to be in a stationary orbit, I would place it several thousand miles above the earth. But if that's the case, to see it at all, it would have to be extremely big. But I don't know if it's logical for aliens to bring in such a large mother ship. If I was them, I would have the main vessel wait further out, closer to the fringe of the solar system. I would only send in a scout ship towards the earth.'

'Then how can you explain its orbit?' Adam asked.

'Very easily,' Watch said. 'It is under power. It is not simply floating around our world. I believe it is much lower down, maybe a hundred or two hundred miles above us, and that its engines are working hard to keep it in place.'

Bryce turned to the transporter, which they had brought with them. 'I wonder if this can send out a locking signal,' he said. 'Or else pick one up.'

'I am sure it can,' Watch said. 'And now that we know precisely which direction to point it in, I think Cindy can relax. We will not have to send out a series of hamsters and see if they come back alive. I should be able to lock on to it.'

'That's good,' Cindy said. 'I still feel bad about the one we killed.'

'I think a lot of hamsters have died in Mr Snakol's back room in the last two days,' Adam said grimly. 'I wonder why these aliens have come here.'

'They may be simply exploring,' Watch said.

'They may be bent on conquest,' Bryce said. 'We have to assume the worst. When we have the transporter locked on target, I want to be one of those to go.'

'I thought we were all going,' Adam said.

'That's probably not a good idea,' Watch said. 'For all we know Mr Snakol is back at the school. Two of us should go there, while two of us should try to board the saucer.'

'Then I want to go with Bryce,' Adam said.

'Are you sure?' Cindy asked, worried. 'We are not certain about this equipment. You might materialise in outer space, or else inside a wall of the space ship.'

'That's true,' Watch said. 'This could be a one way trip.'

'I trust Watch will be able to lock the transporter on the proper coordinates,' Bryce said. 'I can go alone if I must.'

'I am not afraid,' Adam said, although in truth he disliked the idea of materialising inside a wall. 'If Sally is to be rescued, then two will stand a better chance of doing it than one.'

'Then it is settled,' Bryce said. 'Adam and I will try to board the saucer. Cindy and Watch can return to the school and try to locate Mr Snakol.'

'It might be better if I stay here with the transporter,' Watch said. 'I might be able to beam you out if there's trouble.'

'But we have no way of communicating with you,' Bryce said. 'And we can't send Cindy alone to the school, especially not at night. Don't worry, Adam and I will find a way back.'

Watch turned his attention back to the transporter. 'Let me see if I can bounce a signal in the direction the telescope is pointing. We have to be able to do that first if anyone is to get anywhere.'



Cindy gave both Bryce and Adam a big hug. 'You guys take care of yourselves. Don't let the aliens steal you off to another world.'

'Been there, done that,' Adam joked, referring to Ekweel2 and his pals from the future. But even though he joked, the sky up above suddenly seemed to vast. Not the safest place to venture into.

A few minutes later Watch believed he had the transporter locked on the saucer. Adam and Bryce stood aside, while Watch pointed the device at them. Cindy waved and said goodbye again. There were tears on her face. Carefully Watch depressed a couple of buttons. Then there was a flash of blue light, and it seemed, to Adam, as if all the stars in the heavens suddenly rushed towards them. He felt himself falling and flying at the same time. He just prayed he found a safe place to land.

Ten

Sally and George were the two luckiest people in the world, even though they were no longer properly on the world. One minute after escaping from their jail cell, they stumbled into a room that appeared to hold the Lizzies' armament. They were even more lucky in that the place was deserted. Sally stared around at the different ray guns in wonder, and thought how much Watch would enjoy examining the exotic weapons. Reaching for what appeared to be a laser rifle, she shouldered it and pointed the barrel at the far wall. George stood nervously nearby.

'I wonder how powerful this thing is,' she said.

'Don't try it out,' George warned. 'You might burn a hole in the spaceship hull.'

Sally gave him a serious look. 'It might come to that, George.'

George fidgeted. 'What do you mean?'

'I know you know what I mean. These aliens have to be stopped. If we have to destroy this ship to stop them, then we will do it.'

George paled. 'With us aboard?'

'Yes.'

'But I thought you just wanted to escape!'

Sally put a hand on his shoulder. 'One thing us kids who live in Spooksville have had to learn is that individual and global needs do not always coincide. Just being a twelve-year-old in Spooksville means living a life of complete and unselfish service.'

'But I just moved here,' George said. 'I just started school. I didn't even get to go to second period!'

Sally continued to study the weapon. 'I wonder if this weapon can be set on overload.'

'You mean, so it will explode like a bomb?'

'Yes.'

George was horrified. 'Don't do that now!' At least let us try to escape.'

Sally smiled and reached for a hand-sized weapon on the shelves. 'Like most brilliant young people, I have a few personal problems. But wanting to commit suicide isn't one of them. I will only blow up this ship if I am forced to.' She handed the smaller weapon to George. 'This one looks more like your size,'

George took the gun but eyed it suspiciously. 'We don't know if these weapons are set to stun or to kill.'



'Maybe it's better that we don't know,' Sally said. 'But if the Lizzies try to stop us, we open fire. Understood?'

'But we've just met these creatures. We might want to know more about them before we start an interstellar war.'

'We know enough already,' Sally said. 'They entered our society under false pretences and then kidnapped us by force. They are not peaceful. They want our world and they are technologically superior to us. In the end, even if they just want to live with us, they will take over. No, we have to harden our hearts and tighten our belts. This is all-out war.'

'But they took our belts,' George said. 'How can we tighten them?'

Sally had to smile, but the gesture was short lived. She stepped towards the exit. 'Follow me and do exactly what I say, and without argument. We are taking over this ship.'

George trudged behind. 'I just wish my family had stayed in Los Angeles.'

Once out in the grey corridor, they didn't see any Lizzies but they did notice a faint humming sound. It had been there before but now it interested Sally. It seemed to be coming from behind and below them. She told George to listen closely.

'That could be the engine room,' Sally said.

'So?'

'Don't be obtuse. The engine room will be the centre of power for the whole ship. If we can gain control of that, we can dictate our demands.'

'What does obtuse mean?'

'Just look in a mirror, George.' Sally turned. 'Now stay close, ready to fire. And whatever you do, don't accidentally shoot me.'

'I will do my best,' George said in a miffed tone.

They found the engine room a minute later, and there was no mistaking it. In the centre of the room was a huge transparent cube that obviously contained tremendous energies; the walls of it crawled with streams of high intensity light, mainly violets and blues. It was three times higher than a normal adult. Around it, on all four sides, was a complex control panel. Four separate Lizzies, minus their human disguises, stood by the instruments. None of the aliens seemed to notice as Sally and George crept into the room. Sally whispered over her shoulder.

'I am going to shoot the one on the far right,' she whispered. 'Then I am going to demand that the others surrender.'

'Why shoot any of them?' George said. 'Just have them surrender.'

Sally shook her head. 'I have to show that I mean business.'

George spoke with unexpected resolve. 'But to kill one of them by shooting him in the back — only a coward would do that.'

Sally was annoyed. 'If they are as civilised as you think they are, then their weapons should automatically be set on stun. Besides, they are the aggressors here. Now just shut up and let me make the tactical decisions. Remember, I'm the one rescuing you.'

But George spoke again. 'Just one other thing, Sally. They may not speak English. They may not know that you want them to surrender.'

Sally took aim. 'I will make it clear with my body language.'

She fired, and a thin stream of green energy poured from the barrel of the rifle and struck the Lizzie on the far right. With a painful cry he went down. The other turned; they appeared unarmed, stunned. Before they could move, Sally was up on her feet and moving towards them, her rifle threatening.



'Get your scaly arms in the air, you cold blooded monsters!' she screamed. 'I am Sarah Wilcox from Spooksville USA and I don't know the meaning of the word mercy. Get down on your slimy knees and get those claws up!'

They seemed to understand well enough. Glancing uneasily at each other, they fell to their knees and raised their arms. Sally hurried to the side of the alien she had shot and gave him a short kick in the side. He groaned; he was alive. George continued to hang by the door, which annoyed her.

'George!' she shouted. 'Take off your robe and rip it into tiny strips. I want these Lizzies bound and gagged.'

George blinked and wandered into the centre of the room with his ray gun hanging by his side. 'Why do I have to take off my robe? Why don't you take off yours?'

'Because I am a girl, all right? Stop complaining. You have your underwear on. Get to it while I continue to try to save the world.' Sally took a step towards one of the three kneeling Lizzies and put her gun to his head. Of course, it could have been a her but that was neither here nor there. It was an ugly brute, with a wide snout and angry green eyes. She nudged him with the gun. 'Do you understand English?' she asked.

The Lizzie nodded.

'Do you speak it?' she asked.

The Lizzie shook its head.

Sally gestured to the control panel with her rifle. 'Get over there. I want you to contact your bridge. Tell them that Sarah Wilcox has taken command of your engine room.'

George had pulled the white robe over his head and was busy tearing it up. 'What about me? I deserve some of the credit.'

'That's the trouble with your pacifists,' Sally said. 'When the battle is over, you always want a medal.' She turned her attention back to the Lizzie she had pinned to the control panel and again shoved her gun in its head. 'Convey my message now or I will shoot. In fact, tell them that if they try to break in here, I will fire at this cube here and blow up the ship. Do you understand?'

The Lizzie nodded. It pushed a button and spoke into a small red box. Its voice was mainly hissing and snarling. Sally couldn't make out a word, except she knew it was mad. When it finished talking, she gestured to the earth, which they could see out of a window at the rear of the engine room.

'I want to land there,' she said.

The Lizzie shook its head.

Sally raised her rifle and pointed between its eyes. 'Yes! Land!'

The Lizzie gestured helplessly to the earth.

Sally hesitated. 'You want to know where?'

The Lizzie nodded.

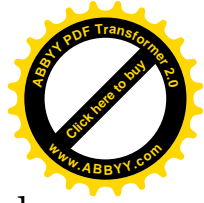
Sally lowered the rifle slightly. 'Don't worry, we'll land in a secluded spot. You understand?'

The Lizzie nodded.

'Africa. Any place on that continent except the Sahara. I hate sand and hot weather. You understand?'

The Lizzie nodded and turned back to the controls.

Sally stayed close, watching its moves. 'If you try anything funny, I will destroy this ship. We are a noble people. We gladly give our lives to protect others.'



'Not gladly,' George muttered as he went about tying up the other two aliens who remained on their knees. The other one, the Lizzie she had stunned, was showing more signs of life. Sally told George to tie him up as well. For the first time since waking up on the ship, she felt in control. The Lizzie beside her was doing what she asked. Out of the window she could see the earth terrain changing, coming closer. They were definitely moving in the direction of Africa.

She had wanted an out of the way place to land because she was afraid the US Air Force would try to blow them out of the sky if they appeared on their radar screens. Of course, she had no intention of letting the aliens go, even if they dropped her and George off where they wanted. The Lizzies were too dangerous; they had to be destroyed.

But even the best laid plans of humans and aliens are subject to change. The window in the engine room was not really a window at all, so it seemed, but a viewing screen. The view of approaching Africa was suddenly replaced by the faces of Adam and Bryce. Each had a Lizzie on either side, and an exotic gun to their heads.

'Boys,' Sally said in surprise. 'What are you two doing here?'

'We beamed aboard to rescue you,' Adam said, and he glanced up at their captors. 'But they caught us the moment we appeared in their control room.'

'That was not a smart place to transport into,' Sally said.

'We didn't exactly have a lot of choice in the matter,' Bryce said.

'Bryce,' Sally said in a condescending tone. 'Why is it that whenever you try to rescue somebody you always end up needing help yourself?'

Bryce was not amused. 'At least you could thank me for making the effort.'

'Hi, guys,' George said as he walked closer to the screen.

'George!' Adam said with pleasure. 'We thought you were dead.'

'I am tougher than I look,' George said.

Sally sighed. 'Oh brother.'

'Sally,' Adam said as he was nudged by the Lizzie who stood over him. 'We have a problem here. These aliens don't speak English very well but they have made it clear that you have taken control of their engine room.'

'That's correct,' Sally said. 'I am at this moment directing the ship towards Africa.'

'Why Africa?' Bryce asked.

'I love lions and elephants,' Sally said.

'Sally,' Adam continued in a serious voice as he glared once more at his captors. 'The aliens have made it clear to us that if you don't surrender the engine room they will shoot one of us.'

'Do you have a choice which one of you they shoot?' Sally asked.

'I knew she was going to say that,' Bryce groaned.

Adam showed rare signs of distress. 'I think they are serious, Sally.'

Sally hesitated then slowly nodded. 'I understand,' she said in a gentle voice. 'What do you want me to do, Adam?'

'Don't I get a vote?' Bryce complained.

'I know exactly how you feel,' George muttered as he returned to tying up the aliens.

'I'm not sure,' Adam replied to Sally. 'You and George have done well for yourselves. I only regret we have fouled up your plans. But I don't know if I have a right to tell you to give up the engine room. You know, the stakes might be pretty high here.'

Sally understood. 'The safety of the whole world might be at stake.'

Adam nodded grimly. 'That is more important than our few lives.'



'It depends on how you look at it,' George said hastily.

Sally slowly moved her weapon away from the Lizzie who was guiding the ship to Africa, and pointed it once again at the power cube, which continued to shine with waves of blue and violent energy.

'Tell your guards,' Sally said in a deadly voice, 'that I want to be able to keep an eye on you at all times. That if they even remove you from my sight — never mind harm you — I will destroy this vessel.'

'Are you bluffing?' Bryce asked under his breath.

Sally flashed a dark grin. 'When it comes to all of mankind, I don't bluff.'

Eleven

When Cindy and Watch reached the school, they found Mr Snakol sitting outside behind the science class beside a cage with a hamster in it. The night was dark; they were able to get close to him without his knowledge. He had on his human disguise. They peered at him from round the side of the building. Cindy spoke with disgust.

'I can't believe how he eats them alive,' she said.

'You might judge him too harshly,' Watch said. 'We eat hamburgers, but can you imagine if we had to go out, kill the cow, and then cut it to pieces before we had a burger? We would probably all become vegetarians.'

Cindy grimaced. 'I see what you mean. But Mr Snakol and his alien friends are still invaders. They came here in secret and they have at the very least kidnapped two of our people.'

'We are not sure they are here to invade,' Watch said. 'Their technology is obviously superior to our own. If they wanted just to take over, I don't think they would have much trouble.'

'You're saying if their intentions were totally evil you don't think they would bother to act as school teachers?' Cindy asked.

Watch shrugged. 'We are guessing in the dark. Yet look at him now. He looks depressed.'

'Probably because he just discovered we stole his transporter,' Cindy said.

'Perhaps,' Watch said. 'But my gut instinct tells me something else is bothering him. I think I should risk trying to talk to him.'

'If you're going to talk to him, I'm going with you.'

Watch paused and stared at her with his thick glasses. 'You are remarkably brave.'

Cindy smiled. 'You mean, for a girl?'

Watch stuttered. 'No. I mean, yes and no.'

Cindy touched his arm. 'That's all right, I'm not offended. I'm not like Sally when it comes to such remarks. Hey, guess what I tried to tell Adam yesterday?'

'I can't imagine,' Watch said.

'I tried to tell him that I liked him. And you know what happened?'

'I can imagine.'

'He got all flustered. 'Do you think that means he likes me?'

'Definitely,' Watch said.

But Cindy was uncertain. 'Sometimes he confuses me. He likes being my friend but he likes to keep me at a distance as well. Why do you think that is?'

'Maybe it's because he is twelve years old.'



'But I'm twelve years old,' Cindy said.

It was Watch's turn to smile. 'Yeah, but you're a girl. Come on, let's try talking to Mr Snakol. He looks like he needs a friend right now.'

Watch may have been right. Mr Snakol did not even glance up as they came closer. Yet he was not focused on the hamster that sat in the cage beside him. He had his head down, maybe even his eyes closed, and seemed lost in thought. They actually had to call his name to get his attention.

'Mr Snakol,' Cindy said gently. 'It's Cindy Makey. And this is my friend Watch. We would like to talk to you.'

They did not startle him. Indeed, he raised his head slowly and looked over with only passing interest. 'Hello,' he said flatly.

Cindy and Watch came closer. 'Do you want to talk, sir?' Watch asked.

Mr Snakol sighed. 'You know I am no sir.'

'That is true,' Watch said. 'We were the ones who stole your transporting device. We have also located your ship in orbit above this city.'

Mr Snakol stared straight ahead. His green eyes were not as bright as they usually were. 'It is not in orbit above us right now,' he said quietly.

Cindy gave Watch an anxious look. 'But we beamed our friends aboard,' she said. 'Did we beam them into empty space?'

'It was there when we transported them,' Watch said confidently. 'I think what Mr Snakol means is that it is not there now.' Watch paused, hoping he was right. 'Is that not so, sir?'

But Mr Snakol shook his head. 'I don't know anything for sure anymore.'

Because he appeared so devastated, they found themselves kneeling close beside him. 'Can you tell us why you are here?' Cindy asked softly.

Mr Snakol put a large hand up to his face head. 'We are here because we are desperate.'

'There is something wrong with your home planet?' Watch asked.

'Yes.' Mr Snakol finally glanced over. 'But it is not your problem.'

'But we'd like to help, if we can,' Cindy said. 'Tell us.'

Mr Snakol drew in a long laboured breath, that sort of hissed into his lungs.

'Very well,' he said. 'But I don't know what can be done to save my people from extinction.'

You see, our technology is far more advanced than your people's. But even we could not deflect a comet that ploughed into the heart of our solar system. It was so big and it was moving so fast. We tried altering its course with anti-matter bombs, but they only severed to break it into fragments. A dozen of these large fragments hit our planet, and what had once been a warm and lush world was turned almost overnight into a black and barren freezer. The power of the impacts vaporised billions of tons of water and covered our entire world in clouds. Whole continents of dust were stirred up and that also served to blot out our sun.' Mr Snakol sighed. 'Our people began to die. They are dying now as we speak. Only a few spaceships escaped the destruction. They have been sent out to try to find another world where we can live.'

Cindy spoke carefully. 'We understand your predicament, but we already occupy this world. Can't you find another one?'

Mr Snakol stared at them once more. 'You misunderstand us. We have no intention of taking your world from you by force. That would be against our highest ideals.'

'Excuse me for being blunt,' Watch said. 'But it is obvious you would like at least to share our world with us.'



Mr Snakol nodded vigorously. 'But can you blame us? We are in a dire situation. Every day our ship orbits your world, ten thousand of my people die back home.'

'But why did you personally come here to Spooksville?' Cindy asked. 'Why pretend to be a science teacher? And why were you always telling us we had to perform dissections?'

'My role here at this school has been to perform psychological and sociological experiments,' Mr Snakol said. 'You probably know by now that we are a reptilian race. We must eat little animals alive in order to survive. As the class progressed, it was my plan to expose more of your students to the idea of how reptiles live. In other words, I was sent here to see if your youth would be repulsed by our lifestyle.'

'No offence,' Watch said. 'But you completely gross us out.'

'But why did you kill George?' Cindy asked.

'We did not kill George. He is aboard our ship, with Sarah. I decided to take George directly aboard because he seemed an unusually sensitive human. I thought if he could see our way of life, and adapt to it, the majority of mankind would also be able to accept us as well.'

'But you sit here depressed,' Watch said. 'It is like you feel your experiments have already failed.'

Mr Snakol groaned and lowered his head. 'But they have failed, and our race is already doomed. You are the best and brightest your world has to offer. And you have greeted us by attacking us.'

'No,' Cindy said. 'You attacked us by kidnapping George. We did nothing to your people.'

Watch frowned. 'Sally?'

Cindy turned to him. 'What?'

'Your friend is right,' Mr Snakol said. 'Sarah has taken at least partial control of our ship. My people notified me before they moved out of range of my communicator. She is threatening to blow up the vessel. But that act alone does not destroy us — it is what it represents. I see all too clearly now. Your people, especially your youth, will never accept us.'

'But can't you find another planet with hospitable conditions?' Watch said.

'We have looked hard. Our time is short. No, we will be extinct before we find another world as suitable as this one.' Mr Snakol lowered his head further and it seemed as if he wept. 'We are finished.'

'Not necessarily,' Watch said, standing up. 'There may yet be a way for both our races to share this world. I have a plan, a wild plan. But to make it work I have to get to your ship, to the others. I have your transporter back at my house. Can you beam us to wherever your ship is?'

Mr Snakol looked up and there was a spark of hope in his green eyes. 'Yes. I should be able to, if Sarah hasn't blown up the ship yet. At the last word they were heading towards Africa.'

Cindy also stood. 'Sounds like a perfectly ridiculous place to head.'

'Sounds like our Sally,' Watch agreed.

Twelve

Aboard the Lizzie spaceship, all hell had broken loose. Sally's threat to blow up the vessel had stalled the Lizzie's long enough that they had been able to land in Africa. The moment



they had set down, however, Sally had forced the Lizzies under the barrel of her rifle to open all the doors on the ship. By chance they had landed in Africa next to a herd of lions. Even as Sally and George kept the Lizzies under guard in the engine room, they could hear the lions prowling the halls outside. They could even hear a few Lizzies screaming in pain, and shots being fired from the aliens' energy beam weapons. On the screen, at least for the time being, the lions had yet to reach the control room. Bryce and Adam were still under guard, but their guards were getting anxious.

'Why did you let the lions in?' Bryce wanted to know.

'I wanted to shake up the stalemate,' Sally replied.

Adam looked at something off screen. It seemed as if they had a lion pawing at their doorstep. 'I don't know if the shake up has resulted in our advantage,' Adam said.

'We have to get off this ship,' Sally said. 'At the same time, we can't let the Lizzies escape.'

'Do you want us to tell that to the lions?' Bryce asked anxiously. 'I think the one outside our door is eating one of the Lizzies.'

The guard behind Adam shoved him angrily with his energy weapon. Adam had to fight to keep his balance. 'I think they are demanding you give up the engine room now,' he said hastily. 'They are about to start shooting.'

'Tell them to shoot Bryce first,' Sally said.

'And to think I was worried about this girl,' Bryce muttered.

Once again Adam's gaze shifted off screen. 'A lion is coming through the door! It has one of the guards! There are more lions coming! Oh no!'

The screen went dead.

Sally stared at it for a long moment.

Her eyes moistened but she refused to cry.

George came up on Sally's side. 'I am sorry,' he said with feeling.

'They're not dead yet!' Sally snapped at him. 'They are resourceful. A few lions can't stop them.'

George was uncertain. 'What are we going to do now?'

Sally shouldered her weapon. 'We will try to go to their aid. And we're taking our prisoners with us. But if we can't get to the control room, then we're getting off this ship, and leaving it to the lions.'

'There are probably more lions outside,' George warned.

'We are armed. We'll scare them away.'

George hesitated. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Yes. If you ask quickly.'

'I know you say you are experienced with all kinds of dangerous adventures and stuff. But do you ever make serious mistakes in judgement? I mean, letting all these lions aboard seems to have been a really stupid act.'

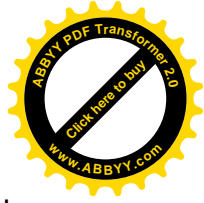
Sally went to snap at him, but caught herself.

'I have been known to make small errors in judgement from time to time,' she admitted quietly. 'But please don't judge me until this is all over.'

'I think we will be dead when this is all over,' George said.

'Then you can blame me in heaven. Let's get these Lizzies untied, and try to make our way to the control room.'

They had no trouble untying the Lizzies, but they did have trouble convincing them to leave the engine room. Humans and aliens alike could hear the lions prowling outside. Only when Sally made it clear George would walk in front of them, with her taking up the



rear, did they agree to move. Sally gave George explicit orders. Shoot at any large cats that looked like they wanted to eat them. This time George did not argue.

They opened the door and jumped out.

George stunned three lions before Sally could blink.

'Good shooting,' Sally said impressed. 'There is hope for you yet.'

But there were growls coming from both directions in the curving corridor. 'Which way?' George called back.

'Just keep going,' Sally said. 'Stay alert.'

It sounded like simple advice to follow. But the moment they rounded the corridor they ran into not less than a dozen hungry lions. George fired off several shots, along with Sally, but it was clear they were not going to be able to hold off the herd. In haste — with the order of the group completely disintegrating — they retreated back down the corridor.

Now nobody was guarding anybody. They were all just trying to avoid being eaten. Yet the Lizzies had some sense of where they were heading. A few moments later they came to a door to the outside, and piled out on to the African plain.

They were in hot country. In every direction they could see the air shimmer as it steamed off the boiling ground. Yet there was vegetation, a few ragged bushes and trees that seemed to stand in defiance of the heat. Fortunately there were no lions visible. It seemed the entire herd had jumped at the chance to board the ship.

'They were probably drawn to the air conditioning,' George replied when Sally pointed out the absence of lions.

'No,' Sally said sadly. 'They were drawn to the fresh meat.'

There were other Lizzies outside beside the ones they had been guarding. But there was no Adam and Bryce. Sally hung her head weakly and George put a comforting arm over her shoulder.

'You said it yourself,' George said. 'They're tough. They might get out yet.'

Sally stared at him for a moment.

Then she lifted her rifle back up to her shoulder.

'Stay here,' she said. 'Guard the Lizzies. I'm going after them.'

George grabbed her arm. 'If you go back in there you'll die.'

'No,' Sally said. 'They're tough. But I'm tougher.'

Sally walked towards the interior of the ship.

A lion stood at the threshold.

She shot it, stunned it.

The animal collapsed and she stepped over it.

Another lion came and she shot it as well. But then four came at her at once and she almost had her arm taken off by the last one to go down. If she did not stun them enough, they kept charging. Each animal required at least a two-second burst from the weapon to get knocked out. She had been wrong about one thing. They did not scare easily.

She had no idea where the control room was. But passing a room that might have been a transporter deck, she heard human cries. Peering inside, she saw Adam and Bryce huddled in a corner with one Lizzie guard, who was carrying one obviously failing hand gun. Six lions had them cornered, and they were big suckers.

Sally wasted no time. Striding towards the beasts, she fired in quick succession. Naturally the lions turned on her and it seemed as if there was no way she was going to knock them all out in time. But just then a burst of green light came from behind her and she turned in surprise to find George. The last of the lions hit the floor.



'I ordered you to stay outside,' Sally said.

'I couldn't let you get all the glory,' George said, glancing behind him. 'But let's get out of here while the coast is clear.'

But before they could leave the transporter room, three figures appeared on a glowing platform: Mr Snakol, Cindy and Watch. They stared at the fallen lions in wonder.

'I can see you guys have been having fun,' Watch said.

'These lions will wake up any second!' Sally gasped. 'Let's get outside!'

As a group they rushed out of the saucer and on to the hot plain, locking the door behind them. There were twenty Lizzies waiting in the boiling sun, including Mr Snakol. A few even held weapons but no one was in a mood to shoot at each other. Nevertheless, Mr Snakol held up his arms and asked for a truce.

'There is no reason for us to behave like enemies,' he said. 'Especially now that Watch has come up with a plan that may save our race from annihilation. Watch, could you explain it while I translate for my partners?'

'No problem,' Watch said. But before he told of his solution, he outlined to his friends what had happened on Mr Snakol's home planet. They all listened with interest, even Sally, who continued to keep her rifle ready. Then Watch launched into his plan.

'The Lizzies have not been able to find another suitable world in this sector of the galaxy,' he said. 'It's possible they might find one tomorrow, or ten years from now. But it would be unfair to them to leave their existence to chance. So what I propose is this. We will help them build a super-powered transporter in Spooksville's cemetery, with which I am told they can transport all their people here from their home planet, even without the aid of spaceships — as long as they have a receiver on this end.'

'But that is no solution at all,' Sally protested. 'This world isn't big enough for both races.'

'It isn't big enough for both races at this time,' Watch said. 'But as the Lizzies are transported here, they can immediately use the Secret Path to travel back in time seventy million years, back to the era of the dinosaurs. At that time the conditions will actually be more hospitable for the Lizzies. They like hot humid weather.'

'But can they survive with a bunch of dinosaurs walking around?' Adam asked, although he thought his friend's plan was brilliant. Mr Snakol spoke up.

'Don't worry, Adam,' he said. 'We survived a killer comet. We can survive a few dinosaurs.'

'All this may be destined,' Bryce said. 'Perhaps the Lizzies are the ones who bring about the sudden extinction of the dinosaurs.'

'Just a second,' Sally said. 'If all your people are on our world seventy million years ago, then you will mess up our own evolution.'

'No,' Watch said. 'Before any transporting begins, Mr Snakol will get his people to promise to leave our world after ten thousand years. That will give them one hundred centuries to find another suitable world. Plenty of time.'

'But what is the promise of a snake worth?' Sally asked.

Mr Snakol spoke up. 'We are an honourable people. When we make a promise, we keep it. It must be obvious to you that we could take your world from you right now if we wanted to.'

'Over my dead body,' Sally said grimly, fingering her gun.

Adam raised a hand. 'Sally, calm down. I think Watch's plan is perfect. Both races get to enjoy this planet. That's how it should be.'



'But you do have to be careful not to tamper with our future evolution in any way,' Bryce told Mr Snakol. 'That is crucial. The slightest change in our ancestors could affect us drastically here in the present.'

'We will be very careful not to change anything,' Mr Snakol promised.

Epilogue

Yet after they got the transporter set up, and finished sending the entire Lizzie race through Madeline Templeton's tombstone, they got a scare. They were walking to school from the cemetery — they had missed a whole day of class saving the alien race — when Sally suddenly stopped on the road and picked up a frog.

'Yummy,' she said. 'A big fat juicy one.'

'Sally?' Adam said, instantly worried that their genes had been affected in the distant past. His worry leapfrogged to outright anxiety when Sally opened her mouth wide and held the dangling frog above it.

'This is going to be good,' Sally murmured in anticipation.

'Stop!' Cindy cried. 'That's disgusting.'

'This is a definite change in character,' Watch said.

'I don't know about that,' Bryce muttered.

'Wait and have it for lunch,' George said, perhaps suffering from the belief that this was just another odd thing kids in Springville did while walking to school. But Adam stepped to Sally's side and grabbed her arm before she could bite into the frog.

'What is wrong with you?' Adam gasped. 'Have you been changed?'

But Sally burst out laughing and set the frog down.

'Nah,' she said. 'I just wanted to scare you guys, that's all.'

George laughed but he was the only one.

The rest of them just wanted to get to school.

And maybe have a normal day. For once.