

SEVEN

May you live in interesting times.

—Ancient Chinese Curse

As I swallowed the last bite of Spaghetti-o's the phone rang and a car horn blared outside. I dashed to the door, stuck my head out, and yelled, "Be there in a second, Grace!" Behind the wheel of her Falcon—on its last legs, poor thing, but we still called it the *Millennium Falcon* with affection—Grace smiled and nodded. I ran back to the phone and lifted the receiver in mid-ring. "Hello?"

"Hey there."

"Hi, Mom. I hate to cut you short, but—"

"What time is your debate tournament?"

"Four, and it's three-thirty already. Grace just pulled up."

"Things would be a lot easier for you if you'd go to work and earn enough money to get yourself a car."

"Mom—"

"All right." Her voice warmed. "Do well at your tournament, hon."

I smiled. "Don't I always?"

"I wouldn't know. You've never brought home a trophy."

“Bye, Mom.”

“I’ll see you when I get home.”

I hung up, put on my ugly brown and green coat, and stuffed its non-matching tie into a pocket so I could carry the briefcase and card file outside. I hoped Grace wasn’t pissed off; she’d gone out of her way to pick me up as it was.

Accouterments dumped into the back seat, Grace put the car in gear and we headed out. “Where is everybody?” she asked, commenting on the empty driveway.

I ticked them off on my fingers. “My brother has a soccer game in Miami Springs. My parents—my mom, I mean—is at work. I’m going to a debate tournament. I think our dog’s out on the back porch. My father’s dead.”

“Not funny.”

“So solly.”

The rest of the drive to our high school was spent in silence. Grace parked in the senior parking lot because it made her feel superior; we were both freshmen.

At the cafeteria Grace and I spotted our school’s other three teams.

“Master debaters,” I announced, “we are here!”

Bill Thurgood looked up to regard me blandly with his pasty expression. “You’ll pardon us if we don’t stand up,” he said.

I gave him my best diabetes-inducing smile. “I thought you *were* standing up, Bill.” Bill was short.

Jim Allen, the club president, handed us a dittoed sheet still smelling faintly of alcohol. “We’ve got a bye in the third round.” I pointed out the shadowed box to Grace.

“You’ve also got a round right now in two thirty-six. You’re negative team.”

“Wonderful.”

The team was waiting for us when we got to 236. We set up quickly, shook hands all around, and got started.

The lights went out just as I concluded my rebuttal

speech. It was four-thirty. We opened the shades to brighten the room and resumed the debate.

We had an hour-long break between first and second rounds. Grace and I went out to her car, planning to grab dinner at Burger King.

The car wouldn't start.

"Did you check the tires?" I asked.

"Funny." She turned the key in the ignition once more, pumping the gas pedal with her high-heeled foot.

"Alas, poor *Falcon*," I said mournfully. "I knew it well."

She shot me a hateful look. "Don't you know anything about cars? I thought all guys were supposed to."

"Fortunately, I am not the typical high school male. This is everything I know about cars: you put the key in and turn it. Through some mystical process I'll never understand, the engine starts. If you want to go forward you press your foot down. If something goes wrong you fix it."

"And how do you fix it?"

I shrugged. "You call a mechanic."

"Gee, thanks." She pulled the key out of the ignition. "I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that this is your way home tonight, too."

"Yes, it has. Look, your engine's not even turning over. It's probably your battery. Maybe we could get a jump from somebody."

"Yeah, okay. Good idea." Her tone said that she didn't think it was such a good idea, but that she had no better one.

I got out and walked over to another car with two guys sitting in the front seat. They looked familiar; I think they were from Killian High. I explained our situation to the driver and asked if he could give us a jump. Grace had cables in her trunk.

"Sorry," he said. "I can't get mine to start, either."

I frowned. Looking over the roof of his car I saw three people trying to push-start a Volkswagen at the far end of the parking lot. "Have you looked under the hood yet?" I asked him.

"No. It's probably the same problem you've got, though. Dead battery."

"Or a missing one." I pointed at the Volkswagen. "I wouldn't put it past somebody to come by here and steal batteries out of some of the cars."

He got out and opened the hood. The battery was still there. "Well, that answers that. Let's try something." He opened his trunk and pulled out a set of jumper cables. After attaching them to the battery's terminals he held the loose ends and touched them together. "Nothing," he said. "No spark."

"Holy shit!" yelled his friend on the passenger's side. "Did you see that?"

"What?" the driver and I asked simultaneously.

He pointed. "From out of the trees by the road there. It was . . . huge. Some kind of animal. Like a lion, but bigger. Lots bigger."

"Bear, maybe?"

I made a rude noise. "Our school might be out in the boonies, but it's not that far out." The guy who'd seen the animal got out from the car. "Where'd it go?" I asked.

"It just shot out from between the trees and ran around the corner, that way." He pointed west. I looked at the intersection where he was pointing. The red light was out. Below it were unmoving cars.

Grace came up beside me. "It looks like everything's stopped at once," she said.

Grace and I tried to call home for rides. The phones weren't working. Not even a dial tone.

Nobody else could give us a ride home either. Their cars

wouldn't work. Even watches had stopped.

"Come on," I said to Grace. "Let's go home."

"How?"

"Your legs still work, don't they?"

"It's at least a three-hour walk!"

I grabbed her arm. "Grace. Something's happened. I don't know what could have caused it, but nothing that uses electricity is working."

"Let go of my arm."

I took my hand away. "Sorry."

She rubbed her arm and looked around—taking the opportunity to back a step away from me. "Everything feels . . . different. I don't like this. It's too quiet."

I nodded. "No cars. No power hum. No planes in the sky."

She bit her lower lip, looking at the cars stopped beneath the dark traffic light. "It's like a scene from a movie I saw once. There was this flying saucer and a robot—"

"The Day the Earth Stood Still. The robot's name was Gort."

"Oh." She blinked. "The robot's name was Gort." She tried to smile and her lips quivered.

"Come on, let's go. It'll be dark soon and I don't want to spend most of my time on the road at night." I looked toward the trees where the huge animal had been seen.

"My debate stuff. I don't want to leave my debate stuff here. It'll get stolen."

I didn't argue. I found a janitor and explained to him that we were leaving and wanted to stow our things—could he possibly open our debate class? He could.

That accomplished, we hit the road.

We were silent most of the way, each wrapped in our own thoughts and one question underlying them all: *what had happened?*

It was completely dark before we were three-fourths of the way home. My feet were aching by the time we got

there. Hers couldn't have felt any better. I walked her to her house, which was some five miles from mine. I guessed it was a little after eight o'clock when we arrived. We'd seen no people on the road, only a few useless cars stopped in the act of turning or abandoned in the street.

Her house was empty. No lights, which I'd been expecting, but no candles burning either. No telltale flickering through the windows of neighboring houses. The front door was unlocked and we entered cautiously.

"Mom?" she called out. Her voice wasn't very loud. "Dad?"

Nothing.

"Dad's probably still at work," she told me, "but Mom should be here."

"Maybe she went shopping." The nearest shopping center was Cutler Ridge—fifteen miles away.

"Maybe." She was silent a minute. "Pete, can we go outside? I don't like it in here. I can't see my hand in front of my face."

"Sure." We went outside. The neighborhood was eerily quiet, the only sound the chirp of crickets and croak of frogs.

Grace sat down on the concrete front porch. She hugged her knees and looked at the ground. "What do I do?"

I sat wearily beside her. "You could stay here, but you don't know when your parents might be back. I'd offer to stay with you but I can't. My mother's at work in Miami—or was, at any rate—and my brother might even be home by now. It's still almost two hours' walk from here."

"I'll go with you."

"What about your parents?"

She shut her eyes. "I don't want to be alone here."

"Okay." I stood. "Let's get a move on then." I tried to smile.

"Hold on. I need to go to my room and get some socks and another pair of shoes." She started back into the house,

but paused at the doorway. "Now that I think of it, I'd better bring some clothes and things, too. I doubt I'll be back before tomorrow at least."

She came back in a few minutes with a small overnight bag in hand. "I left a note. Let's go."

We left. She didn't look back.

We took back roads toward my house. The farther we stayed from Krome Avenue and other main roads, the less paranoid I felt. If this thing continued people would panic, and I wanted no part of it.

Once we saw a small group of people in the distance. They carried torches and their shouts reached us clearly through the quiet. It looked like a scene from one of the old Universal horror movies: angry villagers march on Frankenstein's castle. We stayed clear.

About a mile from my house Grace saw something moving in the bushes. We stopped and I cocked my head to listen, but heard nothing except spooky wind through the trees. We resumed walking and then I heard it, too: a heavy sound, as if something that weighed an awful lot were stomping through the brush. Curiosity told me to wait and see what it was. Rationality told me to keep right on going. Rationality won.

In a little while we reached my neighborhood. It was sparsely populated and a bit spread out; everybody had built their houses at random there in the boondocks. Grace and I crossed the bridge over the dark canal and headed down the street toward my house. We were tired and our feet dragged. It was quiet except for the wind and the frogs, but there was nothing unusual about that. No lights were on in any houses, though; no cars passed us along the way. I was used to blackouts where we lived; heavy storms often brought lines down. But the thing that made it all seem wrong was the absence of the pale orange city glow of Miami to the north.

We stopped at the foot of the driveway. Wooden posts

holding up a pitifully sagging fence framed the entrance-way. A wooden sign, painted by my father years ago, read THE GAREYS. As I'd expected, no lights were on, no candles burned in the living-room windows. Mom's car wasn't in the driveway, either.

"What now?" Grace asked.

"We wait. See if my brother makes it home. Or my mother. If not I'll leave a note, and tomorrow we'll go back to your house and see if anybody showed up there."

"And after that?"

Any reply I could have made was stopped by shattering glass. I jerked my head toward the house. A living-room window was now broken. As I watched, the window to the left of it smashed as a portable television—my brother's—hurtled through to crash onto the front porch.

Grace started to say something but I motioned to her to stay quiet. The sound would carry far in the silence. I wanted to whisper to her but couldn't swallow the lump that had formed in my throat.

We squatted low by the mailbox, our voices tight hisses.

"Well?" demanded Grace. "Now what?"

I shook my head, looking at the grass at Grace's feet. It needed mowing. "I don't know."

"Could that be your brother in there? Could he be throwing things because he's mad, because he's afraid?"

"Yeah. Get serious."

"We need to find out. If it's him, we can't just leave him."

I let out a short laugh. "Sure. But who bells the cat?" I looked up at her. "I find it extremely likely that it's not my brother."

She blinked. "Well—there's one way to find out."

"Yeah, I guess so." I pulled a clump of grass from the dirt and tossed it aside. Standing, I brushed my hands against my slacks. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I hope."

"No way. I'm not standing here. I'd rather go with you

than wait here." She glanced around to indicate the silent neighborhood.

"Suit yourself. But we've got to be quiet. Understand?"

"I know how to be quiet. Even girls can do it, under pressure."

I raised an eyebrow at her, then turned toward the house.

The house sat in the middle of a two-acre lot. Grace and I stayed off the U-shaped driveway; we would have been black shadows against the light gray concrete. Instead we crawled on the grass beside the driveway until we were even with the front porch, then I crawled left until I was against the garage wall. I found all this surreal. I felt as if I were playing Army, as if I were leading a commando raid against my own house. I waited until Grace caught up to me and put my lips to her ear. "Wait here," I breathed. "I'm going to see if I can get a good look through the window." She started to protest but I clenched her arm. "One of us has less chance of being seen than both of us." I turned away from her.

I crept along the grass the length of the garage wall until I reached the front porch, where I stopped and tried to calm my breathing and slow my heart, which was trying to hammer its way out of my chest. Shards from the broken window flashed on the front porch, my brother's television in their midst. By the front door was something white and shapeless, like a towel that had been tossed there and forgotten.

I inched forward on hands and knees until I was beneath the nearest window. I stopped under it and held my breath. Voices came from inside. I made out at least three, all male. I glanced behind me. Good—the road made a dark backdrop. When I looked through the window I didn't want my head showing as a black silhouette against a light background.

Placing my hands on the windowsill, I raised myself slowly. The curtains were drawn; I couldn't see a thing.

Next window, then. I went back to hands and knees and crawled four feet to the next window, our big picture window. I cut my palm on a piece of glass, but not badly. I wiped it against my pants.

As I got under the window and prepared to look in, I glanced toward the front door and was shocked to recognize the shapeless white towel. It was Snoopy. She lay on the doormat with her head bashed in. I sat there, looking at her, for a long time.

Grace's scream brought me out of it. I jumped up and turned toward her. *Fuck—if anybody was looking toward the front windows they know you're here now, idiot.*

A man was holding Grace in a bear hug. She struggled futilely, kicking his shins. As I ran for them I heard the front door open behind me, but I didn't look back.

I'm sure I looked ludicrous when I reached Grace. I stopped dead in front of her because she was between me and her attacker. I ran around them so I could hit him from behind, but they whirled as they struggled, so that she faced me again. Her fingernails left bloody trails on his arms. I only hesitated a moment, then ran in, pushed Grace's head out of the way, and hit him full on the jaw. He let go of Grace and staggered back. I recognized him then. Mr. Hess, from up the block. What the hell was he doing here? He was a *cop*, for God's sake.

I should have moved in and finished him off while he was still dazed, but the moment of recognition had caused me to hesitate yet again. Good ol' Pistol-Packin' Pete, always quick on the draw. That hesitation probably cost me everything—I was hit hard from behind. If I'd been on concrete I'd have come away with at least a fractured skull. As it was, I got the wind knocked out of me as I pitched forward onto the grass with two of them on top of me. They turned me over and held me down. I didn't struggle; it would have been stupid. One of them bent over and punched me in the jaw. I didn't go out, but bright blue-white

sheeted across my vision. One of them kicked me in the crotch. Nauseating fire spread in waves. I'd been hit there before, but not like that, never full out like that. All I remember from then on is fists blurring into one another, over and over again until I couldn't feel them anymore.

I woke up in a ditch. Sunlight lanced my eyes. My mouth was a puffy mass somebody had taken an electric sander to. A dull, heavy ache in my groin. Ribs seemed bruised but not broken. Beside me was an upside-down wheelbarrow. I recognized it; it was from our garage. They must have wheeled me out here and dumped me. Maybe they'd left me for dead. I think they came close.

I found I could move well enough to get out of the ditch, albeit painfully. I counted my blessings and dragged myself to the side of the road and lay there, eyes closed. I was tired, so tired. . . .

When I opened my eyes again the sun had just set. I got up—I won't say what it felt like. The ground kept slanting and I saw double. That went away soon but my vision was still blurry and my head rang.

Looking around, I realized I was less than two hundred yards from my house. My feet began moving automatically; I stood before the front door before I realized what I was doing. I looked down. Snoopy was still there. Two windows were shattered. The television rested in the glass. It took two hands and all my strength to press down the latch and open the door. I found Grace inside.

Next day: in the kitchen I stuffed the last of what food I could take into the green, magnesium-framed backpack my parents had given me one Christmas. I closed the flaps, secured the cords with tight knots, and put my arms through the shoulder straps. I fastened the waistband and

walked into the living room, looking around grimly once more before going out the front door for the last time in my life. A cloud of flies buzzed away when I stepped over Snoopy. I walked down the driveway and onto the first of many long roads I would take from then on.

I stopped at the canal a half-mile away. The water was crystal clear. The weeds, or whatever the hell you call them, swayed languidly on the bottom. I set my pack down and sat on the edge of the bridge, looking into the water for a long time.

That canal used to be filthy. Neighborhood kids swam in it; I never understood how they could stand it. The water had been brown, the edges of the bank lined with dark green scum. Now it was clear. No scum, no floating beer cans. No rusted shopping cart, pushed in by Jeff Simmons a year ago. I shook my head, not understanding, and shouldered my pack. I turned to go and stopped cold.

Something stood on the road ahead of me. It was the size of a mobile home. I'd never seen anything like it, not outside a theater or an H.P. Lovecraft story. Superficially it looked like a lion; at least, it had a lion's body. It was shaggy and the hair was darker and much coarser than a lion's, almost like a Brillo pad. It had a disturbingly human face. The features were almost caricatured: practically no lip, a large, wide, and vaguely Negroid nose, bushy eyebrows, and smoldering red eyes. The face was framed by a thick, brown mane. On its rear end, where a lion's tail should have been, was the tail of a scorpion. It was long and segmented, and poised with the contained power of a cobra's neck. It ended in a needle-like stinger a foot long. The tail waved back and forth in the air.

It was motionless and silent, regarding me with hot, red eyes.

(A year later I would be in a library, leafing through a

text on mythological animals, and I would stop when I came across a picture resembling this creature. I would remember the name underneath: *manticore*.)

It headed for me, slowly at first, but gradually gathering speed. There was nowhere to run, no way on earth to get away from this thing. It left the road, ran a short space on the grass by the canal bank, and jumped when it reached the bridge. It sailed over my head and landed on the other side of the canal. The force of its landing vibrated through the soles of my shoes. I almost wet my pants. The thing didn't even look at me as it hit; it just began running at terrific speed down the road. I watched until it disappeared in the distance down the long, straight road, and then for a long time watched the space where it had vanished.

Somewhat the world had changed. Just looking at that space where this impossible thing had been a few minutes before, I knew that. There'd been a Change, and the world would never again be the same.

I never found my mother or my brother. I left behind me the house I'd grown up in, empty except for the stiffening corpse that had been Grace.