The “Grimoire of Moloch” is the book one in the The Thaumaturgy Series.

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Published by The Gurus in the Basement
455 South 660 East
Smithfield, UT 84335

Mark Harris lives in Smithfield Utah with his Wife Shaundale and four amazing children: Genevieve, Isabelle, Malachi and Talmage, and their two cats: Snicker and Creeper.

He currently works as an Online Content Specialist. Fiction, for the time being, is his side-but-fun job, having completed “Grimoire” in 2009. Besides working on book two in the Thaumaturgy: “The Return of the Familiar,” Mark is currently underway on a brand new young adult urban fantasy series called “The Urban Adventures of Gabriel Winston, book one: Ghost of a Chance.” This new series follows the adventures of 13-year-old Gabriel Winston who is a normal, if somewhat dorky kid who doesn’t fit in at school. He only has one real friend, Jack, who pals around with him in a world where he is anything but popular. Oh, but he does have one talent that unfortunately no one believes: he can see an alternate world around us which includes ghosts and other bizarre beings which simply live in a parallel universe all around us pretty much are unable of interfering in our world...for the most part that is.

Special thanks to Shaundale who lets me indulge in my favorite past time, listens to my ideas, offers those of her own and pretends that everything I write has potential and doesn’t suck.
Darren stared at the casket suspended above the open hole, feeling like he was slipping away beneath it into that black mysterious void below. He was no longer out here in the rain with everyone else listening to Bishop Barlow extol Ethan’s virtues, but somewhere beyond the emotions, folding chairs and freezing rain, watching this ceremonial tableau through an invisible barrier. The whole thing might as well have been on television for all the connection he felt with what was taking place around him.

Crissy stared up at him and smiled. His six year-old sister’s almond eyes, a product of her Down’s syndrome, sparkled up at him, happy even though she was being rained on just as much as everyone else. It might be nice to be Crissy, blissfully unaware that Ethan wouldn’t be coming home from Perú. To her this was just a social gathering, albeit a wet one, where people came together to talk and laugh. Life was good when you didn’t totally understand things.

A cold blast of air shot down Darren’s shirt, bringing him back to his dreary surroundings and causing his tall frame to shake violently. At the same moment, he saw a blinding bolt of lightning strike behind the assembled mourners.

“Whoa!” Darren jumped up from his seat and stared at where the lightning had flashed expecting to see dead bodies on the ground. But nothing had changed; no one was screaming or running for cover. No awful thunder shook the ground. In fact Bishop
Barlow went on as if nothing had happened – except for a slight pause and a curious glance at Darren who was on his feet, looking around panic stricken.

Matt and Amy Stevens, Darren’s parents, looked up at him, as if he had just grown an extra hand from the center of his forehead. Hesitantly he sat back down, confused and a bit shaken. What had just happened? Crissy reached up and grabbed his hand and gave him a wry smile as if she understood.

That was weird. How could he be the only one to have seen that? He looked back at where the lightning had struck – or hadn’t struck. There was no large black hole surrounded by smoking corpses; nothing was out of place; just people huddled together, shoulders hunched against the rain trying to hear what was being said up front.

The only thing that gave him pause was the appearance of two strange men in the back. Darren could have sworn they were not part of the original group of mourners. Normally two men in suits wouldn’t be out of place hanging out at a funeral. They wouldn’t have even drawn Darren’s notice except for how dry they appeared to be.

Everyone else was standing in a defensive posture to ward off the unexpected rain; these two stood up straight, calmly surveying their surroundings showing no sign of annoyance at the sudden downpour. The rain didn’t spring off their suits or heads like it did off everyone else: it simply ignored them.

The taller of the two had elaborately combed hair, like he was some teen idol from the fifties. His elegant coif was as dry as Ricky Nelson’s in an old western movie. And
the other, a man so obese he seemed nearly as wide as he was tall, had a cruel face and a crooked mouth. He was bald, with short tufts of hair above his ears. No rain dripped down the sides of his bulging cheeks or across the front of his glasses. It was uncanny.

Darren scanned the rest of the crowd, but no one else seemed to notice this peculiarity about the men. In fact, no one else seemed to notice them at all. He was suddenly reminded of the eerie stories his grandfather Atavus told him and Crissy: creepy stories of witches and warlocks and the freakish powers they had over nature and the world. This time the shiver that shook him was self induced.

He looked down at Crissy in her little dark hat and matching jacket sitting there shaking in the cool, wet air. The last time either of them had seen Ethan was right before he left for Perú. It was the middle of July. Ethan had left with two closest friends, Jeff Tabor and Tabitha “Tabs” Winchester. The three of them were traveling with Utah State University’s Anthropology department for a five-week Ethnographic Field School in a small fishing village on the sea-cost called Huanchaco. A week before Ethan was to return to the United States, mom had received a phone call. It was from the University, a Mr. Jacobsen. It started off with, “There was an accident,” and ended with, “I’m so sorry.” It had taken a month to recover his body and ship it back to the states.

Everyone rose for the conclusion of the service, the dedication of the gravesite. Following this they would lower his brother’s casket into the ground. Darren glanced to the back of the mourners, to see the two men that had remained dry, but they were gone.
While everyone else’s heads were bowed for the prayer, Darren searched out across the long rolling lawn that led to the curbside where strings of dark cars were parked. The men were nowhere. He began to wonder if he had ever really seen them all. The anxiety of Ethan’s death must be affecting him in some bizarre adverse way.

After the dedicatory prayer, those who braved the weather came by to express their final sympathies to the family members. From somewhere umbrellas had been produced so that the rain no longer hit Darren and his family as they shook hands and listened to people share obscure memories of Ethan with them. They meant well, Darren understood, but found himself ready for the day to be over. Crissy sat and grinned at each person who shook her hand. There was no sense of impatience on her part, nor any sadness at her loss.

The casket had been lowered into place and finally the family was making its way down to the cars. Darren shivered again as another blast of cold air blew down his collar. He was almost to the curb when another flash of lightning struck near the burial site. He whipped around to see what it hit. But once again there was no damage, no fire and of course no one else reacting to it. Again, he was the only one to have seen it. But the two men that the rain had ignored were back again. They were looking down into the cavity of earth as if they were employed to ensure the body got safely underground. A ray of sunshine hit them in the same strange way that made it difficult to see them in detail, but there was no doubt they were the same men.
What connection did they have to his brother?

He was about to ask his father if he knew them but his parents were whisked back into the hearse before he got a chance. Then he and Crissy were hurried into a dark sedan and driven back to the church.

A luncheon had been prepared for after the service. Darren’s family, his parents and sister, along with aunts and uncles and grandparents from his mother’s side were all in attendance along with some close neighbors and friends. Several of Ethan’s basketball teammates had shown up from the University and expressed their condolences. Noticeably missing from the gathering, however, were Jeff and Tabs. They had been in Perú with Ethan and also perished in the cave-in that had taken the life of his brother.

The strange men from the graveside did not put in an appearance.

At long last the awful day came to a conclusion. It was around five o’clock and Darren and his immediate family were released to go home. His parents had been practically incapable of communication since Ethan’s death, contrary to their normal overt social behavior. Darren’s father, Matt, who could always be found in the kitchen cooking, baking or barbecuing while blasting music, retired to the family room alone to watch the news. His mother, Amy, a part-time nurse, had gone to her bedroom. Darren was sure she was in there going through the photo album again.
Crissy had wandered off down the hall toward Atavus’ room. The two got on extremely well. Just like Atavus and Ethan had.

Darren’s bedroom was upstairs, across the hall from Ethan’s. He didn’t fight the impulse but went straight into his brother’s room and sat down on the bed. Everything was exactly the same, as if his brother’s passing hadn’t connected emotionally with the objects in his room. They sat in expectation of Ethan’s return, unaware that they should be different somehow.

On the bedside table next to the clock radio was a photograph of Ethan rappelling off of Corona Arch in Moab, Utah. Someone from the ground had taken the picture, capturing Ethan in a dare-devil position. He was suspended about forty feet beneath the giant red arch with a one-hundred foot drop beneath him. It was an amazing picture!

But then Ethan had been amazing. He excelled at everything he did – basket was foremost, but he was also an excellent student and musician. Before graduating from Sky View high school, Ethan had taken a shop class and built the headboard to his bed. He’d used a beautiful hardwood which he’d sanded and lacquered to a perfect finish. Considering his brother’s accomplishments Darren couldn’t help but feel inadequate. There was nothing Ethan couldn’t do.

The headboard was five feet tall with three levels of shelves built in as well as an outlet and light sockets. The upper shelves had sliding glass doors, behind which sat most of Ethan’s trophies and awards. The majority of them were for basketball, but there
was one for an art contest, and two for musical competitions he’d competed in – Ethan had played saxophone.

Darren kneeled up on the bed and gazed at these awards. They sat there like everything else in his room declaring the achievements of a person whom they refused to recognize no longer existed.

He ran his hand along the side panel of the headboard, drawn to it because there was a small flaw there. Granted, he was being nit-picky; it was almost impossible to detect. He touched the corner where the joints came together; there was just the faintest indication of a raised line. Every other corner of this masterpiece was perfect, but this one edge was definitely subpar. Not like Ethan to have missed it.

As he felt along the seam, his knuckle brushed against the upper part of the shelf, rubbing across a small notch that wasn’t visible at eye-level. He probed at the hidden notches, there were two, and slightly pressed on the first one. Suddenly the side board that contained the flaw slid smoothly down into the panel beneath it, revealing a secret compartment.

At first this revelation surprised him. A secret compartment, how cool was that? But then, it was just like Ethan to have included something like this in what he made. Darren reached inside the opening, felt around and pulled out what was hidden inside.

The first object was heavy and appeared to be a flat round stone with a chain connected to it. It was the weird compass type thing Atavus had given Ethan at the
beginning of summer. Darren couldn’t recall the strange name of the amulet but it was supposed to do something mysterious. Though roughly the size and shape of a compass, it was heavy, made of what Darren suspected was a gray, smooth marble. There was no glass to cover the spindles; they simply sat exposed on the surface. And instead of having a single needle pointing north, this contraption had seven little arms of different lengths and colors pointing at weird symbols etched into the outer edge.

Darren picked it up and examined it more closely. Those little arms seemed to be made of some sharp strips of metal that rotated around the center peg. The outer circumference of the object was a shiny black strip that was smooth to the touch and felt like glass. Whatever it was that Atavus had given his brother it certainly was intriguing.

The other item was a sheaf of papers. They didn’t feel like normal paper, they were thicker and had the pliability of paper currency. Instead of being white like a page from a notebook, they were an oatmeal color. They were filled with Ethan’s handwriting. Starting with the first page, Darren started reading:

June 15

Atavus insisted I use this parchment and keep a journal of my activities. It just feels like thick paper to me, but, I’m beginning to believe just about everything Atavus says these days. Including what he said about this paper being “charmed.” I guess we’ll find out.
Today was our first day out. Jeff, Tabs and I spent the afternoon driving out to the more remote areas of the valley. The Utor Uti didn’t react at all. I’m beginning to think Atavus was wrong in his suspicions. He received a letter from someone, he wouldn’t tell me who, that insists that this is the right place to look; and he put a great deal of urgency into our finding it. Between his walker and his oxygen tank, he’s in no shape to go looking for it himself. And he seems to be getting worse all the time. As for this, “lapiseus calx,” which Atavus also refers to as a “slicer stone,” (something about “slicing” into other dimensions) it seems like it could be just about anywhere. The friend who needs the stone believes it could make all the difference in the great battle. Atavus is a bit mystical about what “all the difference” means, but he’s always mystical. (If dad knew what we were up to he’d think I’d lost it – and probably disown me! He thinks his father’s gone round the bend.)

Tabs is supposed to guide us and give us insights. So far she’s told us there could be as many as three of them and that they would be found “where shadows walk and stones are dust.”So far this new sense of hers hasn’t told us where that is. So much for Atavus’ description of Tab’s ability: “She will shine a mysterious light on you and keep you on the right path, forewarning you of dangers.”

Which reminds me, Atavus still hasn’t told me how to destroy them. He said it would come to me when I needed to know. He only gives me bits and pieces. I’m trying to get what I can from that old scrapbook of his.
Well – G’nite.

I forgot to mention Rachel...new girl at school – met her after a game one night. She’s devastatingly cute and seems to like me. More later.

Darren set the pages aside. Atavus had really worked his magic on Ethan. It was unbelievable to think that his older brother had been caught up in all this nonsense; vain attempts to find imaginary objects: incredible! And he got Jeff and Tabs to go along with him as well. How had Atavus done it? Certainly Ethan was too smart to fall for the old man’s delusions. Wasn’t he?

He scooped up the pages and the compass – obviously it was the Utor Uti mentioned in the journal – and headed across the hall to his own room. He wanted to read the journal pages later, but he didn’t want his parents running across them accidentally. He lifted his mattress and placed them well underneath.

The Utor Uti was another matter. It was pretty cool, but still it was nothing more than a crazy object his grandfather had constructed in order to add credence to his world of make-believe. Regardless of where Atavus had gotten the thing, Darren was returning it to him this instant.

As he tromped down the stairs prepared to shove it into his grandfather’s hands, he saw the back of his little sister leading a tall stranger down the hall to his grandfather’s room. The man wore a black cloak, boots and had long dark hair.
He hurried down the rest of the flight and rounded the corner toward Atavus’ room, but his little sister was on her way back, alone.

“Who was that?” Darren asked.

“Grandpa’s friend,” she replied and smiled at her older brother.

“I’ve never seen him before.”

Crissy’s eyes grew wide. “He’s really tall. But he’s not scawy.” She shook her head.

Darren grunted and slid past his little sister. He covered the hallway quietly and sidled up beside the open door to listen.

“I’m just saying your timing could be better,” Atavus was complaining. “We just had a funeral.”

The stranger replied in a low gruff voice. “I know. I watched from a distance. This illness kept you from being there?”

Darren didn’t hear a reply, but could picture his grandfather nodding.

“A couple of our friends were there; kept to themselves.”

Atavus began coughing and gasping. “Nothing happened?”

“No, they only seemed to be interested in seeing that the body got buried.”

“Where are they from?” his grandfather wheezed. “I haven’t seen their kind for decades.”
“There’s a coven in the north. They supposedly unraveled a mystery about the Grimoire I mentioned in my last letter.”

“An ancient spell book written shortly after the flood. I thought that was a myth. Of course look who I’m talking to; you’ve been chasing it for almost a century.”

“Quiet old man!” the stranger hissed. “Is your brain as damaged as your lungs? There are many dangerous people seeking that book. The Grimoire has spells witches haven’t used in millennia. In the wrong hands . . .” He let his comment trail off.

“I suppose this Northern Coven found the location of the Grimoire?” Darren could hear the sneer in his grandfather’s voice.

“There was a prophecy that no one could decipher, but lately I’ve been receiving word that it has been unraveled. I have no idea what they’re doing here in Cache Valley. But the fact that the boy was a Pessum Ire explains why they were lurking about at the burial. I wouldn’t be surprised if . . .” His comment died off again.

“You wouldn’t be surprised if what?” Atavus pressed

“If those warlocks knew about Ethan, they might be responsible for his death.”

It was quiet in the room. Darren’s mind was spinning. Who was the stranger, and how was it he shared Atavus' delusions? What was going on?

“They would have had to follow him to South America,” Atavus replied quietly.

“Travel is not a problem for them.”
“No, but all this presupposes they knew he was a Pessum Ire, and if they did then they must know about me. Ethan never used the fire that I’m aware of; there would be no reason to suspect him. Unless. . .”

“Who knows about you?” The stranger’s voice was sharp.

“No one. I’ve told stories to my grandchildren; that’s all. Of course Ethan knew for the better part of the last year.”

“And the other boy? Darren? Has he shown any signs of being Pessum Ire?”

“He’s a good kid, but a skeptic. He listens to my stories patiently, but he doesn’t believe a word of them.”

“Still, somehow those warlocks know about you. Given your condition they don’t seem to be very concerned about you, however.”

“No,” the old man sighed. “I don’t pose much of threat these days. One good blast and I’d be dead.”

“Well, you’d take them all down with you.” Darren could hear the other man’s voice lighten up as he spoke these words – words that were designed to be comforting despite their ominous implications.

“I can’t stay much longer Atavus. I need to know if Ethan found the Lapiseus Calx before he died.”
“No,” Atavus said, then broke off into some serious coughing. At length it came to an end. “I had him search, but even with the *Utor Uti* they uncovered nothing. Tell me more about your plans for the splicer stone.”

“No plans . . . exactly. I came upon some old writings; they had nothing to do with my search for Moloch’s Grimoire. These few lines talked about non-witches entering the *Appensus*.”

“That’s the dimension you’re interested in?” The old man gasped.

“Only as a precaution. I don’t really want to go there, but, if a surprise attack gave us an advantage . . .”

“We don’t understand enough about that place to even know what is possible there.”

“I’ll send you the translation. There was something in it that I think will make you understand why I believe it is still urgent that we have one.”

“Hmm.”

He could hear the two clasp hands, or arms, either way it made him think of warriors bidding the other farewell before battle.

“Atavus, I’ll try to return before that powder completely does you in. And stop feeling guilty about what happened, grandpa.”

“You haven’t called me that in a while.” Atavus cough-laughed at the stranger’s use of the word.
“I’d stay, but I have a lead on a prophecy stone. It should shed light on another mystery.”

“The *Pessum Ire* Detective,” Atavus wheezed and both men chuckled.

“I’ll write you in the regular fashion soon with more explanations – and I will be back Atavus.”

It was quiet in the room again. Darren wondered if it was because Atavus doubted the man would keep his promise. Then it occurred to him, the man would be stepping out of the room at any second so he darted down the hall back toward the living room.

He plopped down on the couch next to Crissy. A mere moment later the man strode from the hallway looking like a black knight without armor. His hair was long and dark; his beard was only scruff but gave him both a gallant and dangerous air. Other than the somber colors of his wardrobe and his huge size, he wouldn’t have appeared so mystical, but he also wore a cloak. Who wore cloaks? Darren didn’t see a sword, but it wouldn’t have been out of place.

Without pausing he approached the two children and sized them up carefully. He had penetrating blue eyes that struck Darren for they were both placid like still water and cold like frost.

“Take care of your grandfather,” the stranger said directly to Darren. “And listen to him.” It wasn’t some idle statement, but a command. The stranger appeared as if he were going to say more, but nodded to himself instead.
Turning his attention on Crissy he bent over and examined her closely. He didn’t say anything, and she wasn’t frightened by his proximity or size. He stood up straight and shook his head. “Huh,” he mused. “Maybe, you never know.”

Without another word he left the house.

Darren glanced over at Crissy who smiled back at him and said, “I like him.”

Back in his room that night he tried to make sense of the completely odd things that had taken place. Strangers whom the rain didn’t soak, Ethan’s secret compartment in his headboard, *Utor Uti’s* and *Lapiseus Calx*, and tall dark intimidating strangers, and that place the slicer stone was supposed to open, what was it? *Appensus*? And more talk about witches and warlocks. It was all nonsense and crazy-talk. He was ready to just go to sleep and forget everything.

And that’s what he did.

Over the next eighteen months, his home life never again took on the fun, easy-going rhythm that Matt and Amy had managed to create around the house prior to Ethan’s death. Both of his parents shrank quietly into their own little worlds. They took care of business, they took care of Crissy and Atavus and Darren. But they were perfunctory about life, going through the motions with their souls as absent as Ethan’s.

Atavus’ condition continued to worsen as the eighteen months passed. He now slept a good deal of the time. Darren however, grew closer to him; he found him the
only one he could talk to. He was the only one that was interested in Darren’s ball
games and girlfriend and the other events that took place in his life.

Darren was now a senior in high school and captain of the basketball team at Sky
View. Though he didn’t have the support from his parents he had hoped for, he felt like
he was making progress in filling the immense shoes left behind by his brother.

He didn’t think back about those strange events on the day of Ethan’s funeral. All
he remembered about that day was that it was the day Ethan had been buried, changing
Darren’s life forever.

But those were just the beginning of the changes that would soon take place in
Darren’s life.
“Shouldn’t he be here by now?”

Instead of answering immediately Darren threw the basketball to Tony who dropped his pool cue in order to catch it.

“Here,” T.J. said from the opposite side of the pool table. Tony tossed the ball to him. Without warning T.J. bulleted the ball past Darren to the leather couch where Seth, the pony-tailed, giant reached out with one hand and caught the ball that stuck to his palm with a loud smacking sound. Shelley, Seth’s beautiful, half-Japanese girlfriend, sat undisturbed by his side.

Darren grinned and nodded in approval as Tony and T.J. laughed appreciatively at Seth’s one-handed catch.

“He said he’d be here at seven, it’s only a few minutes past. He’ll be here.” Darren opened his palms toward Seth, who threw him the ball.

“Why do we always wait for Mike?” Andrea, a short perky brunette with elfin features stood before him with her head cocked to one side. She was cute when she did that.

“He’s part of the team,” Darren explained. “And besides, we’d wait for you.”
His cheerleader girlfriend appeared skeptical, but let the subject drop. Instead she gravitated over to Lindsey and Sandy who were spinning the handles of Tony’s foosball table.

Darren glanced quickly over at the now darkened windows of Tony’s game room. He could have sworn there was movement out there, a shadow ducking out of sight. But he’d been seeing a lot of that sort of thing lately, or thought he had. He wasn’t one to be paranoid, but recently he had this feeling someone was watching him. But of course that was crazy.

The exterior door from the patio burst open. “Hi-yah!” bellowed Mike, as he bounded into the game room striking a pose from his taekwondo class.

Tall, with chestnut colored skin, and black hair grown out in a relaxed afro, Mike was quite the sight – particularly due to the white sunglasses he wore, despite the darkness outside. He was still wearing his white robe and black belt with three stripes, indicating his third-degree black belt status. As everyone’s attention turned on him, he leapt into the air and came down on his hands, rolled across the floor and jumped back to his feet.

“Miss me?” He leaned toward Darren and they waggled fingers at each other, a gesture they’d been using since they were six-years old.

The others applauded; Mike’s entrances were always entertaining. Darren glanced over at Andrea who had wandered back toward him and sat down on the arm
of the leather sofa. She was wearing a short white pleated skirt with a peach colored tank-top. Instead of clapping she gave Mike a tolerant smile and shook her head.

She considered Mike a goof-off; too foolish for her tastes, which bothered Darren; Mike was Darren’s best friend. His girlfriend and best friend tolerated each other but only for Darren’s sake.

Darren had met Andrea shortly after Ethan’s death. It was last year during a pep assembly. She had approached him and asked what position he played. Later he found out she knew very little about basketball. When he’d said, “I play point guard, like John Stockton,” it had meant nothing to her. She had just wanted to talk to him. As it turned out that was okay with him. He was more than simply enamored with her. She was knock-out cute, with liquid brown eyes; her hair was cut short, just below her ears and feathered around her face in a pixie cut. Her slender neck was accented by a silver chain with a black stone.

Lindsey, her ginger colored hair flying behind her, hurried from around the foosball table and struck a pose in front of Mike. She shouted, “Hi-yah!”

Mike smiled and replied, “You sure?”

“Come on, scaredy-cat! Afraid of a little girl?” Lindsey jumped around with her hands held out in front of her in the typical karate chop position. She swung at him and he blocked without really thinking.
They leaped about in a fake fight, Lindsey lunging and Mike parrying her moves with unmistakable fluidity. T.J and Tony stopped their pool game to watch the sparring.

“Go for the eyes,” Tony urged.

Lindsey threw a straight-fingered chop at Mike’s face. He grabbed her wrist and turned her about like a dancer performing a spin. She quickly recovered and bounced back at him, saying, “Hah,” with each strike. “Hah! Hah!”

“What’s gotten into this girl tonight?” Mike grinned. “I’m gonna end up hurting her.”

“Come on, I’ll bite your legs off,” she challenged, borrowing the line from Monte Python.

“Oh, girl, you’re in over your head.” Nevertheless, his smile suggested a competitive invitation.

“Sweep her up,” Darren suggested.

“That move? You sure?” Mike continued blocking her blows though he’d turned his attention toward Darren.

“She’ll love it.”

“Okay.” He turned to Lindsey. “Remember, this was Darren’s idea.”
Mike jumped toward her, swept her legs out from under her with a spin and using his own momentum rolled beneath her so that she landed on his chest, breaking her fall. It was a weird move, but never failed to please.

Lindsey giggled and Mike laughed good-naturedly. He jumped to his feet, helping Lindsey get to hers. “Come on, I’ll play you at Wii.”

“I thought we’re going to do karaoke when Mike got here.” T.J. banged his cue stick on the ground.

“No,” Darren said. “We were going to use the Wii to work some plays for the game tomorrow.”

“Boring!” groaned the four girls in the room.

“But tomorrow’s game will determine whether we’re in the state championship.” Darren turned to his friends for support.

Andrea stood up and grabbed his arm. Gazing into his eyes she said, “Everyone knows you’re going to win the game tomorrow. You need a break from it tonight.”

“We don’t need to run those plays, Dare. And I know what we should do instead.” Mike took center stage. “Listen guys. Yesterday coach had me return some equipment to his office and I saw something I’d never seen before.”

“A chest hair?” Tony quipped.

“Humility?” T.J. followed.
“Very funny,” Mike griped.

“Actually, it was pretty funny,” Darren chuckled.

Mike turned to his best friend and shook his head. “Et tu, Brute?” His face fell into an exaggerated expression of betrayal and he dropped to his knees. “Perhaps I’ll just stop the story there. I’m sure there are some friends somewhere who’d like to follow up on my discovery.”

“No, tell us.” Sandy said jumping up.

“Yes, please.” Lindsey blurted. She raised her arms into the karate forms she’d been using moments ago. “Don’t make me break these out on you again!”

“All right, all right, I’ll tell you,” Mike jumped back to his feet. Scanning his male friends he added. “But only because you sent the girls out to kick my butt.” Then slowly he articulated: “Coach has a chair on wheels that rolls around on a rug. Well, the rug was out of place and so I saw that under his desk is a trap door.”

“Oh, yeah,” T.J. said. “There are several of them in different classrooms. When they built the school they ran all the pipes and ductwork for heating and cooling underneath. It’s just a crawl space.”

“Au contraire,” Mike corrected pointing a long finger in his direction. “You can stand up down there.”

“You went down there?” Darren asked incredulously. “You’re a felon.”

“I’m a felon? A felon? I’m freakin’ Marco Polo is what I am.”
“What did you find?” Andrea asked, curiosity getting the best of her.

“Well,” he shrugged, looking sheepish, “pipes and ductwork.”

His friends laughed. Tony tossed a pool cue-chalk at his head.

“So you want us to break into the school to see a bunch of pipes?” Seth’s deep voice resonating from the couch surprised them all, as they had a tendency to forget he was there.

“If it’s dirty, I’m not going.” Shelley grabbed Seth’s arm for emphasis.

“Oh, I see.” Mike pointed at her teasingly. “You’re okay breaking into the school as long as you don’t get dirty?”

“There’s got to be more to this,” Darren insisted. “You don’t want us to break into the school, and climb into a hole to see pipes.”

“Indeed I do not, compadre. Before I went down into the hole, I noticed that there was a flashlight on a credenza to the side of coach’s desk. I grabbed it, dropped down into the hole and started poking around. After I dropped into the opening, one of the basketballs fell inside and rolled away into the darkness. I tried to find it among all those grimy pipes and stuff. There’s so much dirt down there you can smell it, and I know I’m beginning to get my pretty face all messed up. Finally I found the ball, but before heading back I decide to look around a bit. I head further in when one of those dirty little pipes covered in years of dust and grime, sticks out in
front of my foot and down I go.” He used his hands in a sliding motion to indicate how he fell.

“Well, of course I threw my arms out in front of me to break my fall. I kept hold of the flashlight, but dropped the basketball. I start looking for it. And this is where it gets kind of weird. It would be better to show you, really.”

“Show us what?” T.J. asked.

“Yeah, what was down there?” Tony demanded. “Was it a dead slimy baby, come back to life that sucks the blood out of anyone it can find in the school late at night?”

Everyone turned to gape at Tony.

“Where did that come from?” Darren asked.

“You’ve been watching too many of your dad’s movies,” Mike laughed, referring to Tony’s movie-star father. “No, nothing quite that bizarre I’m afraid. But, it was strange just the same. And I’m not kidding, this really happened. I walked a little further along the passage to this area that ramped upward. I shined the light in front of me and there at the top of the dirt ramp I found the basketball.”

Everyone stopped and stared at him.

“So you found the ball? That’s it?” T.J. asked.

“You weren’t listening. I said it was at the top of a dirt mound that ramped upward. I wasn’t sure if I was seeing things right. The ball had rolled to the top of
this little mound and stopped. So, I walked over to the side and took it down and set it at the bottom of the ramp and it rolled up it again, only this time it hadn’t already been rolling toward it. This dirt ramp was three and half feet high."

It was silent for a moment as everyone took this in.

“That is weird,” Shelley snuggled closer to Seth.

“I don’t know why, but that makes my skin crawl,” Sandy confessed.

“Hey, don’t get freaked out,” Mike said. “It’s not scary, it’s just, trippy. But you’ve got to see it! It’s totally sick!”

“And you’ve figured out a way for us to get in?” Darren asked.

“Of course. Come on; let’s go.”

The others shared looks between them. Darren glanced down at Andrea. She shrugged her assent.

Seth rose from the couch, towering above everyone else. “I want to see this.”

Shelley took his hand but obviously didn’t share his enthusiasm.

March in northern Utah is cold. Darren and Andrea were squished together in the passenger’s seat of Mike’s jeep, the top was still off, and they were freezing.

Seth and Shelley were slightly warmer in the back seat huddled together under a blanket. Tony followed them over to the high school in his Mazda RX-8. T.J. was in
the passenger seat playing with the mp3 player while Sandy and Lindsey were comfortably ensconced in the leather seats in the back.

They parked their cars near the back of the main lot where the entrance to the Recreation Center – that was incorporated into the school – was located. There were a several other cars parked about. The bright lights of another vehicle sliced through the night as it entered the parking lot not so far behind them.

The Jeep and Mazda idled next to each other. It was cool outside and the girls were complaining about the cold.

“We’re going in through the Rec Center?” Darren asked his friend.

“Yeah,” Mike confirmed.

“Aren’t the doors between the rec center and the school locked?” Tony called from the window of his sports car humming proudly beside Mike’s jeep.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Mike talked over Darren and Andrea who were holding each other to keep warm. “Let’s go inside and see what we can do.”

The motivation of the group had decreased considerably because of the weather. Seeing a basketball roll up a hill just didn’t seem to be that important any longer. To forestall any backing out, Mike killed the engine to his jeep and jumped out. Darren opened the side door and he and Andrea rolled out as well. After that the rest followed.
Inside the Rec Center, where the heat was on and everyone began feeling better, they approached the front desk, manned by a girl of about twenty and lady in her forties. The two women checked their cards and reminded them that the Rec Center closed at ten o’clock – forty minutes from now.

The group headed down the hall whispering about how ridiculous the whole adventure was. Mike led the way, followed by Darren and Andrea; the rest straggling behind giggling and teasing each other. They passed the door that led off to the pool, down around a turn where stationery bikes were being ridden by middle-aged residents watching T.V.’s set in the walls. They passed through two metal doors that led further into the recreational center. On their right was a glass enclosed room complete with machines, free weights, benches and fans scattered throughout. There were treadmills and stair-climbers across the hall as well as an exercise room where aerobic classes were normally taught. People were scattered throughout these rooms, busy increasing their heart rates or taxing the endurance of their muscles. At last they came to two metal doors that separated the recreation center from the high school.

Tony pushed on the double doors. They moved together as one and flexed back into place, locked.

“Well, it was a fun idea,” Darren said.

Mike pushed Tony out of the way. He reached inside his white robe and pulled out two little metal tools. “This is called a tension wrench.” He held up a
small, flat, metal tool. “And this is the pick.” This time he flashed them a little tool that could have been the instrument the dentist used to scrape plaque off of teeth, only smaller.

Mike inserted his tools into the door’s lock. The others instantly gathered around him as he set to work.

“What are you doing?” Lindsey asked from the back of the group.

Mike glanced up from the lock. “Lindsey, head back around the last turn and watch for anybody coming.”

Lindsey hesitated then took off around the corner.

“What are you picking that?” T.J. asked.

“As I apply pressure on the plug,” Mike said, maneuvering the pick as he spoke. “I find the pins inside the lock, and push them up into the housing.” He moved the pick up and down, listening as he did so. “Until, all of them are up, held in place by the pressure I’m putting on the cylinder.” There was more shifting inside the key hole, “and then I can . . .” There was a small click followed by Mike pushing at the locked door. “Open the door.”

“Ah!” and “Cool!” quietly filled the hallway.

Sandy ran down the hall and brought Lindsey back. They passed through the door that Mike held open, each leaving him with a comment regarding his burglary prowess.
“Nice,” Seth intoned as he took Shelley by the hand and disappeared into the dark school halls.

“That was cool! You gotta show me how to do that.” Tony said.

“Do you do parties?” T.J. joked and followed Tony through the door.

Lindsey and Sandy giggled as they passed through. Lindsey gave Mike an appreciative chop with her hand.

“Let’s hope there’s not a silent alarm.” Darren stopped to point out.

“On the outside, perhaps,” Mike replied. “But the school’s too cheap; this door’s just a simple tumbler lock.”

“Well, once again, life is never boring with you around Mike.” He waggled fingers with his friend.

The last one to pass through the door was Andrea who stopped long enough to say, “Why does it not surprise me that this particular ability is part of your skill-set?”

Mike just grinned at her, but as soon as she caught up with Darren, he pulled a face at her back.

Through the now dark halls of the school, the basketball team and cheerleaders snuck around like thieves down corridors that during the day they ruled like royalty. Darren wondered if the cameras in the ceiling were on at night, and if so, how much they could see in the dim lighting. Getting Mike’s attention, he pointed silently to one of the dark semi-spheres attached to the ceiling. Mike only shook his head.
Whether that meant they didn’t work at night, or that they needn’t worry about them, Darren wasn’t sure. What he was sure of was that Julander, one of the school’s vice-principals, hated him and if he got his hands on film of Darren sneaking around the school after hours, he’d ruin his life with it.

Darren cocked his head for a moment believing he heard something back down the way they had come. It might have been the door they’d entered through being opening again, or it might have been some ambient noise the school produced on its own when no one was around. This feeling of being watched and followed was a nuisance. He shook it off and caught up with the rest of them.

After passing down the long halls, they came to the new gym. Mike whipped out his lock picking tools and started to work on the door. They all gathered around him as he worked, sensing that as long as they were in the school at night they were safer while on the move. For some reason standing still increased their anxiety of being caught.

Nervous laughter from the girls started to annoy Darren. He stared back the way they had come and could have sworn he saw someone duck back behind the wall just as his gazed passed over it. He was positive that this time it wasn’t his imagination. There had been someone back there.

Mike was taking longer than he had on the door that led into the school.

“How’s it coming?” Darren asked.
“Not so good,” Mike admitted to him quietly.

“What’s wrong?”

“There are pins all around the cylinder. It’s probably a tubular lock, they’re almost impossible to pick.”

Andrea, who’d overheard, shared a look of concern with Darren.

“What’s going on?” Sandy asked from the side of the door next to T.J.

“He’s dragging this out so we get caught,” Tony complained.

“You can’t open it,” Seth rumbled from behind the others.

“I didn’t say that,” Mike groused, but was obviously losing his battle with the lock.

Darren watched Mike as he manipulated the tools like an expert. He felt Andrea squeeze his hand, then, a strange tingling shot up his spine, like a cold cloth against his neck. He shivered. Certain that it was the fear of being caught he almost mentioned it when Mike announced:

“Got it!”

There was an audible click, and the door popped open.

This time, they quickly passed through into the gymnasium. They scurried across the long wooden floor, down passed the bleachers, which were automatically pulled into the side walls beneath the balcony seating.
At the far end of the gym were the coaches’ offices. The teenagers scuttled around the turn at the end of the bleachers and entered the small hallway. Mike tried Coach Davis’ door, and thankfully found it wasn’t locked.

Once inside, a strange giddiness descended upon the group.

“I can’t believe we’re in here!” Sandy screeched. She brushed her long curly hair back over her shoulders. Lindsey bobbed on her toes next to her.

“We should have brought a video camera,” Tony said. “We could add a soundtrack and do some Mission Impossible stunts. Pretend we’re hanging from the room suspended over coach’s desk.”

Tony leapt on top of the desk before anyone could stop him. “Hey, you could shoot me up here, like I’m diving into the room from the window.”

“Get down from there!” Darren hissed. “You’re going to break something.”

Tony jumped down, but whispered to T.J. they’d have to come back later and try it.

There wasn’t much room in the small office, so all the movement was causing others to bump into cabinets, or the ball bags, of which there were three. One held a variety of basketballs, the other volley-balls and the last one a collection of footballs, baseballs and softballs.

Pushing the others out of his way, Mike rolled the coach’s chair to one side. He pulled up the mat and exposed the trapdoor beneath it.
Silence settled over them as the first proof of Mike’s claim became evident. There was an entrance to a cavern below.

Darren, who was next to the credenza, grabbed the flashlight that Mike had replaced earlier and flicked it on. “Looks like we’re ready.”

Mike pulled another small flashlight from his robe. “I wasn’t taking chances.”

As soon as the trapdoor was moved out of place, Shelley reminded everyone. “I’m not going down there!” She shook her head and backed away as far as she could given the size of the small room.

“Come on Shell!” Sandy said. “I’ll go if you go. Plus you’ll have Seth to protect you.”

Shelley was unconvinced, but Seth’s gaze and squeeze helped. She nodded, but her watery eyes made it clear she was still scared.

“Anyone else feel like chickening out?” Mike had moved the wooden trap door to one side so the opening had free access.

“Not me! I want to see this thing!” T.J. said.

“Me too,” Tony agreed.

“I kind of want to,” Lindsey said, although her tone left plenty of doubt.

Seth didn’t say a word, but it was clear that he intended to go down. Andrea squeezed Darren’s hand: she was in for the excursion. He loved that she was such a good sport about stuff like this, especially since this escapade was all Mike’s idea.
After grabbing a basketball, Mike dropped down first, followed by Darren who helped Andrea down into the darkness. Next in was Lindsey, followed by Sandy, and finally Shelley, who Seth eased down through the hole by her arms. Seth followed, with T.J and Tony right behind him.

They were bunched together down in the dark. Mike struck out with his smaller light and the rest formed a line and followed. They walked along in the semi-dark, just the two flashlights providing weird, elongated shadows before them. There were indeed pipes down there, mainly running along the top of the shaft, covered in white insulation as well as dust and cobwebs. At their feet were metal pipes that climbed the earthen walls at times, ran along the ceiling and disappeared through the top to some room or another above. The ground was all dirt, otherwise they could stand up straight, with the exception of Seth who, at six-foot six, was forced to stoop the whole way.

“It wasn’t very far,” Mike said. “It’s right up here. Be careful for that crosswise running pipe on the ground; that’s what I tripped over.”

Mike stopped them, indicating with his light where the ramp began. At that moment, Darren felt that strange cold sensation on the back of his neck and spine again. He actually wanted to tell someone to quit breathing down his shirt, but no one was doing it to him.
“Do you see here in front of me, where the dirt forms a small ramp running upward?” He shined his light on the dirt in front of him. They all crowded forward so each could see what he was talking about. It was a slight graded area that went upwards gradually for about ten feet in length to a height of just over three feet.

“Notice how it does go up?”

They all agreed. While in the tunnel they whispered, despite the fact that there was no danger of being heard. It added to the creepy cold feeling Darren couldn’t shake. He did his best to ignore it.

“Now watch.” Mike stooped down to where the rise began. He set the ball where the slope and the flat ground met. At first the ball sat there but before long it began to rock slightly back and forth as if it were teetering on the edge of a basketball hoop deciding to fall in or out. All of the sudden, it rolled right up the incline and stopped at the top.

A hushed “Whoa!” in unison filled the dark cavern as each witnessed the strange physics the ball obeyed. Two of the girls actually shrieked at the weirdness.

“That is creepy!” Sandy said. She and Lindsey had become one they were hugging each other so tightly.

“That is weird!” Darren agreed, his eyes meeting Mike’s. He turned his gaze down at Andrea whose lips were slightly parted as she shook her head in bewilderment.
“Do it again,” Tony whispered.

Mike retrieved the errant basketball and brought it back to the same spot and the same strange occurrence happened a second time. They expressed their amazement again though they knew what was going to happen. It shouldn’t be happening, but there it was, rolling up a hill.

“Maybe there’s some sort of magnetic pull around here coming from up above,” Tony suggested.

“The ball’s made of rubber,” T.J. pointed out. “Even if you were right about magnets, it wouldn’t affect the basketball.”

Darren tried to reason it out, but came up with nothing. Finally he tried the only thing that made sense to him. “My dad told me about the funhouse that used to be at Lagoon.” He was referring to the amusement park in Farmington, Utah that drew thousands each year from Utah, Idaho and other surrounding areas. “He said there was a part of the funhouse called the tilted room. You had to hang onto these bars as you walked up and down through the room. There was a spot where you could see through this dark glass and watch glowing ping-pong balls as they appeared to be bouncing up hill. Maybe it just seems like it’s slanted, but it really isn’t.”

“For that to be true,” T.J. explained, “we would have to be on a slant right now.”

“Which we’d feel if we were,” Andrea finished for him.
“My mother grew up in Salt Lake,” Sandy said, her face as white as her hair under the weak glow of the flashlights. “She said they used to go to a place where the cars, once put in neutral, would roll up hill. They called it Gravity Hill.”

“It’s one thing to hear about it, it’s another thing to see it.” Seth rumbled.

Silence filled the dusty, dirty corridor for a few moments. Mike set the ball down only this time he gave it a little shove. The ball shot to the top, accelerating as if it were thrown down hill.

“Check your watches,” T.J. suggested spookily. “Maybe they’ve stopped working.”

“Nope,” Mike said, “Mine’s still ticking.”

He paused then dramatically exclaimed: “Wait a second, I don’t own a watch!”

The flashlight jerked about crazily until it was under his chin shining gruesomely at the freakish face he pulled.

His teammates laughed, but Sandy and Lindsey screamed, which made the boys laugh harder. Andrea’s grip on Darren’s hand grew tighter. Then she shouted, “I could kill you Mike!” Darren knew she hated being scared.

From the far end of the tunnel near the hole through which they’d entered a creaking sound from above brought a halt to their talking.

Someone was walking overhead.
“Shh!” Darren commanded. They all froze, paralyzed in the dark by the fear of the unknown and being caught.

They listened as the creaking came to a stop. Darren could sense each of his friends trying to breathe through their noses to make the least sound possible. From his side vision, he saw Sandy’s eyes wide with fear and her white hair quivering in the dark.

Each of them stared down the dark tunnel to where a faint bluish glow of the school’s emergency lighting filtered in through the trapdoor. Was someone about to come down? They definitely heard a person up above grumble and move about. The floor creaked again under the stranger’s weight. This was followed by a scraping sound, more creaking then a clunk.

The trap door had been put back in place and the bluish light went out!

Shelley and Sandy muffled their cries of panic.

Still afraid to talk, they listened while the creaking noise moved out of the coach’s office and disappeared. Darren and Mike looked at each other trying to communicate with their eyes.

“Custodian?” Darren mouthed.

“Maybe,” Mike replied.

Tony started toward the entrance, but Mike caught his arm and motioned for him to stay. “Wait,” he said in a whisper that all could hear.
Darren understood Mike’s thinking. Though the creaking had faded away, who was to say whoever was up there wasn’t waiting to catch them as soon as they started talking again?

“We’re not trapped down here are we?” Shelley’s voice trembled as she asked the question.

“No,” Seth replied definitively.

Darren figured no matter what the person had stacked on top of the trapdoor Seth would be able to push it off.

“Do you think it’s safe to leave?” T.J. asked.

“Let’s get out of here!” Shelley answered.

They clamored through the darkened passage toward the trapdoor. Darren shined his flashlight upward, as did Mike. At length they came across the faint seam of the opening above.

Without verbally agreeing, Seth moved forward and lifted the door upward. As he pushed at the trapdoor they heard the rattle of the coach’s chair as it rolled to one side and fell over onto the floor. Seth heaved it away without any trouble.

They scrambled out of the tunnel like there were demons ready to yank them back down and never let them go. Once back in the coach’s office, they glanced about fearfully, afraid that whoever had shut them in might return at any minute.
Smiling in relief, Darren faced his friend and they waggled fingers. Whatever that had been, they seemed to have dodged it.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Darren led the way this time. As a group they scurried through the new gym, out the door and down the dark halls of the school. In much less time than it took them to get to the coach’s office they were bursting through the metal doors that separated the school from the Rec Center. Through these well-lit hallways they continued at a brisk pace, laughing a bit, but also glancing about as if someone might stop them and ask what they’d been up to.

They passed by the front desk; the ladies who’d let them in watched them, curious why they were moving so quickly.

Once they were out the doors and into the cold March night, a lone figure standing at the check-in desk turned and observed them scatter for the two vehicles they arrived in. He’d only been at the desk browsing a schedule a few minutes before they’d come bustling through.

He pulled out his notebook and scribbled a few lines. Darren would no doubt be on his way home from here. His instructions were clear: he was to follow and record all of Darren’s actions. Replacing that trapdoor had not been part of the instructions; however, he hadn’t been precisely forbidden from doing it either.
His night wasn’t over yet. He would spy on the young man as long as he could see in his house, recording everything he did. Once the lights went out, he’d only have a phone call to make and he would finally be excused from this duty.

Of course he’d have to pick up where he left off first thing in the morning.
There were two minutes, six seconds left in the game. Darren drove toward the opposing team’s guard but kept one eye on Mike who was the team’s power forward and was setting up a screen for him. They moved down in unison and as Mike set the pick Darren moved off to the left, forcing the guard to go around Mike and follow him. Mike rolled under the net and Darren passed the ball to him. He put the ball in easily bouncing it off the backboard. The crowd cheered excitedly; they were already on their feet, stomping, and the sound of their enthusiasm increased to a roar as the ball dropped through the hoop. Mike waggled his fingertips with Darren as they headed back down court. Those two points had just put them four points in the lead.

Darren glanced back out at the stands. He knew better than to search for his parents, they wouldn’t be there. He did catch a quick view of Andrea leading the cheers. Her dark hair bobbed up and down with the other cheerleaders as she jumped and clapped, rousing the spectators into an ecstatic frenzy. She turned just in time to wink at him not faltering in her moves. A quick smile and Darren was back in the game.
One minute, forty-seven seconds remained as the Bear’s point guard, Ryan Eubanks, headed past center court with the ball. Darren could tell he had been worked hard and was running out of steam. But suddenly Eubanks faked to the outside, charged past Darren and drove straight down the center, side-stepping Tony and Seth and banked the ball off the backboard. Darren shared a surprised look with Mike. Where had that come from?

At least they were still up by two points and had the ball. With one minute thirty-one seconds remaining, Mike took off for the other side of the court as Darren dribbled slowly toward half-court. He caught up with Seth, the team’s center and said, “Keep on that Eubanks kid. Someone lit a fire under him.” Seth nodded and trotted down toward the bottom of the key.

Darren examined the situation. Mike was moving fast, giving his defender a work out. Seth was underneath with Eubanks close on him. Off to his right, he saw T.J. ready to move in for a three pointer if given the ball. That might be his best move. In any case, it would free Darren up to move underneath the basket.

As the wheels in his mind rotated at lightening-speed, preparing for the pass, a flicker of light, just over T.J.’s shoulder, like the sun reflecting off a mirror, caught his attention. It was a quick flash, barely noticeable, but was instantly replaced by a hazy image hovering just over the stands.
At first it appeared to be a sheer dark sheet flapping above the students, but quickly resolved into a young girl with long blond hair. She was wearing a dark gown and floating in the air above the students. A bright glow surrounded the girl as if someone had trained a spotlight in her direction. The bizarre sight shocked him into place, as he dribbled the ball on automatic. This had to be a stunt, something designed to hype-up the student body. She had probably been suspended up there the entire game, and he had just somehow not noticed.

But, she was transparent…and there was no way he had missed seeing her floating above the bleachers the entire game.

What was going on?

Then it dawned on him that she was a projection. Her image had nothing to do with the game that he could see, but that’s what it had to be: someone was projecting her image across the room. He quickly glanced at the opposite side of the room but could see no light, no projector. This was weird. And then another question occurred to him: how could someone project a three-dimensional image fifteen feet away from the opposite wall?

Confused by Darren’s sudden immobility, T.J. looked back quickly over his own shoulder at where Darren’s eyes were focused. He saw nothing but the students in the stands bobbing and screaming to the tempo of the action on the
court. He glanced back expectantly at Darren, his peripheral vision catching the red luminous numbers of the clock ticking down. Unable to help himself, he motioned for Darren to pass him the ball.

Sweat broke out across Darren’s forehead, but unlike the sweat he’d accumulated during the game, this was cold and clammy. The ethereal image gazed curiously down at him like any other spectator, wondering why he was hesitating. Her eyes bore into him; they were so intense his breath caught. They were a luminous green, unlike any color he’d seen before and for a second, it seemed as if he moved closer to her so that all he saw were those amazing eyes in all their shimmering detail.

“Pass me the ball!” T.J. shouted. Darren looked blankly back at T.J., the basketball bouncing off his fingers like saliva might from his lip. He could see the concern in his teammate’s eyes. The roar of students and parents dropped in volume as they became aware that something was wrong on the court. Darren, not sure if he was panicking over nothing or an actual specter, covered his momentary confusion by glancing back down the lane at Mike. For his part, Mike appeared equally concerned, and started up the key. Attempting to regain his composure, Darren quickly shifted his weight in Mike’s direction to set-up a fake before passing the ball off to T.J. He was not going to look off at the apparition again, but
part of his mind remained on the girl and those eyes and the thrill that coruscated through him alongside the adrenaline flowing through his veins.

A forward from the other team, taking advantage of Darren’s lengthy hesitation, broke free from his position and charged him. Mike was right behind. Darren shifted back toward T.J., feinted, then bounce-passed the ball behind the charging player into the waiting hands of his best friend.

Mike turned, and there were two of the Bear’s players blocking his shot. He faked a jump, popping the ball up and over their outstretched arms into a little arc that came down through the hoop with a satisfying swish sound.

The students in the bleachers recovered from Darren’s momentary inaction and went wild. Someone in the band let loose a wild squeaking note from a reed instrument that shrieked above the cacophony of the cheering crowd.

Relief now flooded Darren as they rushed down to the other end of the court. He’d never suffered a loss of concentration during a game like that before. His coach glared had him, bewildered, to which Darren just grinned and shrugged; after all they had scored on the play.

From the opposite end of the court Darren glanced back to where the floating phantom had been. It was gone. Nothing was suspended from the ceiling. No girl or dark cloth hung in the air. This was almost worse than seeing her. What
was going on? He felt dizzy, and put his hand to his head. There was no moisture in his mouth, and he couldn’t swallow.

“Dude, you look like a ghost. You okay?” It was Mike.

“Fine.” It came out of Darren like dust off a desert. A quick glance at the clock told him there were forty-six seconds left in the game.

This time Walker, one of the Bear’s forwards, bounced the ball to Eubanks, who was just outside the key. The tall point guard snatched it away from Tony who had failed to intercept the pass. Eubanks dribbled around to line up for a straight-on shot and jumped for a three-pointer. The ball hit the rim and bounced straight up toward the ceiling. It came back down right through the hoop. A disappointed groan filled the gymnasium, with the exception of the twenty or so visitors from the other side who were all on their feet screaming to the encouragement of their own cheerleaders.

A three-point advantage, thought Darren, as he took the pass in from T.J. He dribbled quickly down to their side of the court and surveyed the situation. The girl with the green eyes – for the moment – was thrust from his mind. At the post he had Seth; and Tony not far to Seth’s right. T.J. was still holding back just outside the key to the right of the foul-line, and Mike moving in from the left, prepared to set another screen for him. If they did this right not only would it be
pretty, it would be an excellent way to finish the game. He gave Mike the signal. Mike planted himself, setting up another pick; Darren forced his defender to move away by charging toward Mike, who rolled behind his man. Darren passed to Mike then darted underneath the basket. Just as he was in place he turned to receive the ball from Mike and jumped, slamming the ball through the hoop.

The crowd came unglued!

The sound of cheering crashed over him in a wave of sound. Mike was on him, fingers at play with his, as they both jumped up and down with joy.

The Bears traveled down court. The clock was ticking. Darren and his teammates hustled to cover their men. With only fourteen seconds remaining in the game, a whistle blew, somehow being heard above the din, and stopped the clock. The Bears were taking a time-out.

On his way back to his team’s bench, Darren glanced back at the stands; nothing floated above them, no heat mirage, no girl, nothing. It was unnerving and confusing. He shook his head and told himself to stop being ridiculous and jogged the rest of the way back to the Bobcat’s bench.

“Okay, I don’t know where you went for moment there, Stevens, but thankfully you remembered you were in the middle of a ballgame and managed to pull it out at the last moment.” Coach Davis playfully smacked him upside the
head, producing chuckles from the rest of the team. “Keep your head in the game. Now, expect them to be desperate. They’re going to rush hard. If they put in a three-pointer, we’ll be tied. Stop them, even if you have to foul.”

Darren nodded with the rest of his teammates. If they won this game they would be in the State Finals. They put their hands in the center and let out a Bobcat howl – trade-mark of their team. The whistle blew and they rushed back out onto the court.

Everyone except Darren.

As he was backing away from the bench, the sunlight-flash hit his eyes again, and the misty image of the girl reappeared, only this time she floated two rows above the Bobcat bench. She gazed down on him, her head askew. A puzzled expression spread across her pretty face.

Darren was jolted by the sudden apparition. He felt dizzy and the clammy sweat broke out across his body a second time.

Mike grabbed his arm. “Come on!” he ordered. “Head in the game remember?”

“Yeah!” he said, blankly.

He turned his back on the ghost and moved back down court to the middle of the key. Determined to ignore what was floating in the air behind him, he stared
straight at Walker, who was poised to throw the ball in. Tony and T.J. blocked their players from receiving the ball, Seth hung back under the basket, and Mike was keeping an eye on two other players, Eubanks foremost. Darren watched, unable to take a step, and afraid to let his eyes move beyond the play in front of him.

With a quick pass, the ball bounced below Tony’s arm and came up in Eubank’s hands. The tall point guard pivoted and dribbled around Mike to the arc of the three-point line. Nine seconds remained on the clock.

Darren stood in place like he’d been flash-frozen. Mike and Tony closed in on Eubanks who was lining up his jump-shot. Darren made a fumbling move in that direction, but as he did he glimpsed the floating girl back above his home bench. He swallowed hard and focused on Eubanks who threw the ball up and over Mike. It sailed in a faultless arc, lined up perfectly heading to the hoop.

A fearful hush filled the gymnasium. The ball rushed toward the basket. It was going to be a swish. It flew through the hoop and into the net and then . . . bounced out!

There was no way that it could, but it did. The ball bounced out of the net as if it had ricocheted off something solid. It flew in the exact same arc across the
court and back to Eubanks, who numbly caught it, standing there dumbfounded.

He held the ball in his hands as if he’d never thrown it.

Darren stared in amazement, no longer thinking of the hovering ghost. Nor aware of the shiver that had shot up his spine and left him feeling like he’d just stepped out of a freezer.

The entire room was momentarily stunned into silence, confused by what it had witnessed. Then all at once, the gymnasium erupted into cheering and yelling.

A whistle blew long and loud, just enough to top the volume of the crowd; and Eubanks let fly an expletive that was drowned out by all the other noise.

The final buzzer rang loudly, officially ending the game.

Mike’s hand was suddenly on Darren’s shoulder and he said, “I think we just won.” But his voice had all the sound of bewilderment that Darren himself felt.

The shocked fans no longer cared how it had come about, they knew only one thing: they had won!

Darren and Mike made their way over to the bench. Their coach was listening to the Bear’s coach who was yelling at the referee. “What kind of call was that? You’ve got to count that!”

“I don’t know how it happened, but the ball didn’t go through the net. No points.” The referee didn’t really know what else to say.
“But why didn’t it go through the net? Tell me that!” The burley coach was red in the face with indignation.

The ref looked back at Coach Davis, who shrugged at him. But inside the coach’s head he was trying to puzzle something out. He’d heard something right before that ball bounced out. He kept gazing at the backboard and hoop then out across the bleachers. His eyebrows furrowed, and he shook his head. Suddenly he barked at his team, which had gathered round him, “Go congratulate them.” He shook his head again, “You know what I mean.”

The Bobcats went out and shook hands or high-fived the Bears, who all appeared shell shocked. They knew it had happened, but knew it couldn’t have happened. Darren heard himself and his teammates, “Sorry man!” “That was bad luck.” “You played a great game. I don’t know what happened there at the end.”

When he got to Eubanks, Darren said, “Weird.”

Eubanks just muttered, “Yeah, weird.”

The crowd poured off the bleachers filling up the court. The Bears had disappeared into the showers. Andrea was at Darren’s side jumping up and down with excitement – excitement Darren knew he should have been feeling himself. He kept glancing back at the bench, but there was no apparition.
“You were great!” Andrea gushed. “You scored twenty-eight points. You were the high scorer.” Suddenly she embraced him and kissed. Afterwards, she winked at him as she bumped him with her hip. Darren gave her a wan smile.

After showering, and as they changed into street clothes, Darren was unusually quiet. His teammates were in a celebratory mood and gave him a bad time.

“I thought you were going to have a seizure back there Darren.” It was T.J., his wet dirty-blond hair clinging to the sides of his head. He shook it like a dog and the water spattered all about him. “You looked pale and sweaty like someone who’s about to puke or something.”

Seth, walking past on his way to the door, said in his booming deep voice, “He was just trying to psych out the other guys with some voodoo he learned from his grandpa.”

Darren didn’t say anything, but growled under his breath, irritated at the slight against his grandfather.

Tony stopped on his way to the door. “I don’t know what you were thinking, maybe you were just running the clock, but I sure am glad you put it together in time. T.J., do you still want a ride?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” T.J. replied and they left the locker room.
Once Mike and Darren were alone, Mike couldn’t help but ask, “So, you froze up out there.”

Darren pursed his lips. “I didn’t freeze up. I just…”

“You just what?”

“I . . . I think something’s wrong with me. I, uh . . . I saw something.”

“What do you mean you saw something?”

“I mean,” he sighed. “I’m afraid if I tell you, you’ll think I’m crazy. And I might be.”

“You can tell me. Come on, I’ve known you since kindergarten. If you can’t trust me, who can you trust?”

Darren weighed that for a second, afraid if he told him he’d lose that trust.

“Well, near the end of the game, right after Eubanks charged down the center, I had the ball, and I was getting ready to pass it off to T.J., when, uh . . .”

“What?”

“It sounds crazy even before I get it out of my mouth. It’s going to sound insane when I finally say it. Alright, right above the bleachers, I saw this, mirage, I guess. It was this girl, floating in the air, watching the game.” He couldn’t face his friend, but his eyes darted toward him to watch for Mike’s response.

“A girl? Was she cute?”
“What?”

“This girl you saw floating in the air, was she hot?” Mike smiled his toothy grin at him.

“I hadn’t thought about it. Yeah, yeah, actually, I think she was. But are you listening to me? She was floating, and she was see-through.”

“Her clothes were see-through?”

“No,” Darren snapped. “She was see-through. Well, I guess her clothes were see-through too, like I could see the wall behind her. It was like a light was on her and made her transparent. Does that make sense?”

Mike clapped him on the shoulder again. “Man, you must have been missing some serious electrolytes out there.” He chuckled. “You weren’t crazy, you were just dehydrated. You ought to go home and get some rest. Just don’t tell Atavus, he’ll think it was a ghost that’s been haunting your family for years.”

Darren threw at towel at his friend. “Hey, don’t rip on Atavus.”

“Hey Dare, I love the old guy too, but his reality is just a chapter short of a fantasy novel, if you know what I mean.”

Darren laughed. Though the comparison was apt, he instinctively felt protective of the old man and wanted to say something in his defense.

But he didn’t.
As the two young men left the building, off a hallway to the right where it dead-ended, four people were whispering among themselves. They found the ball jumping back out of the net a little too strange, and they had more than a good idea what had caused it. That knowledge, however, did not please them in the slightest.

Someone would have to tell Julander.

From a dark corner, leaning against a bank of lockers, an anxious male voice said, “I felt the vibration of the spell and heard the chime.”

A cultured male voice, standing with his back against the dim light of the window so that his form was in dark-relief asked for the third time, “But you didn’t see anyone new? No casting gesture from a student?”

“No,” replied the first man, irritated at having to give this answer again. “But a spell was cast. Either one of the students is a witch, or someone was among us using a blind-man’s spell.”

A female voice broke-in from further down the dark corridor. “The Warder’s grandson acted erratic on the court tonight. Somehow his behavior is related.”

“He doesn’t even know who he is. And his grandfather is on his death bed and has told him nothing.” This voice belonged to a young man, a student. “I’ve
kept a careful eye on him. His whole life revolves around basketball and that girlfriend of his.” He spat these last words as if admitting it was something unpleasant. “But there’s nothing else. I told you about his little escapade into the school last night. They were just messing around. But there was no witchcraft. And he’s showed no signs of being a Warder. If anything changes, I’ll inform you.”

The woman from the dark hallway replied, “Yes, but perhaps today it just did.”

Darren’s father Matt was certain that his own father, Atavus, was in the beginning stages of Alzheimer’s. Like all old men, Atavus reminisced about his life. Unlike other old men, Atavus’ stories entered into the realm of the fantastic. This propensity of Darren’s grandfather to remember the past as a fantasy had split those who knew him down the middle. There were those who feared, as Matt that Atavus was suffering from Alzheimer’s and that it was progressively growing worse. The rest found it to be an endearing quirk of the old man. Darren’s mother fell into this category.
There was no doubt, however, that at the age of eighty-six, Atavus was suffering from old age. He spent most of his time in bed dealing with emphysema. He had never smoked a day in his life, nor had he ever been in a mine or worked around asbestos. Nevertheless, he suffered from this chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The doctors concluded that at some point in his life he must have been exposed to a dense concentration of carcinogenic particles. Darren’s father, Matt, believed it was due to barbecuing. The man loved to grill and always had. It had always seemed to Darren as if Atavus had a special way with fire.

That was years ago, however. Now his grandfather had difficulty breathing and had to have oxygen always at the ready. When he did get out of bed, which was almost never, it was with the aid of an aluminum walker, and even then he moved at a very slow pace. When he spoke, he would draw deep breaths and wheeze. And if he ever caught a cold, he was immediately taken to the hospital for observation and antibiotics to ensure it didn’t develop into pneumonia.

One thing Atavus loved was to hear about the basketball games he couldn’t attend. He used to be Ethan’s greatest fan when he was alive, and he’d even attended some of Ethan’s games before the emphysema had become too acute to allow it. Now, he was the only one in Darren’s family that cared about his successes on the court. His parents kept their distance from anything basketball
related as it was too painful a reminder of Ethan. So, they simply ignored the fact that when Darren was gone it was to play basketball for the school.

When Darren arrived home that night, he went immediately to his grandfather’s room. He found the old man in his bed. His white hair lay unruly on the pillow. His face was gaunt, with evidence of once rugged features in the strong cheek bones and prominent jaw line. Liver spots speckled his hands and face, and the rest of the skin was fading to the thin transparency of the elderly. Most prominent, however, was a beak-like nose jutting up from the center of his face. This was the man that everyone said Darren looked like – when he was younger, of course.

“Atavus,” Darren said gently waking him.

“Darren,” Atavus wheezed. “I’m not sleeping, just thinking. How are you my boy? How was the game? Did you win?” He finished by inhaling deeply. The air sounded as if it were being strained through a small reedy pipe.

“Not so much Atavus. Take it easy.” Darren rarely called the old man ‘grandpa’ as he preferred being called ‘Atavus.’ “Yeah, we won. It was a hard game; the Bears are a good team. As a matter of fact, they almost tied it up at the end.”

“But they didn’t.” This comment was a wispy exhale. “That’s what counts.”
“I guess so. That’s what everyone else thinks. But, Atavus, it was weird. I’ve never seen anything like this in my life. Their point-guard sent up a three-pointer that went through the hoop and almost through the net but at the last minute bounced out. Doesn’t that seem strange?”

The old man frowned thoughtfully. At length he said, “Did you feel anything when it happened? In your stomach, up your spine or in your head?"

“What?” Darren was puzzled by the question, although this kind of comment was not new from the old man. “No, and I wasn’t the only one to see it. Everyone was talking about it. Their coach was even yelling at the ref.”

“Hmm.” Atavus considered. “But you didn’t feel anything?”

“I don’t think so.” There was so much going on at that moment, he wasn’t sure. Had he felt something when the ball flew back up through the hoop? He might have. He had been pretty distracted at that point by the ghostly-girl that had been floating over the game.

“Well then,” Atavus drew a long breath. “It must have just been one of those things. Life is like that. You think you’ve seen magic, but really, you’ve only seen something that doesn’t make sense from your point-of-view.” He wheezed heavily. “But under different circumstances, it makes perfect sense.”
“I guess,” Darren was oddly comforted by what his grandfather said. He had to be right. Something normal had caused the ball to bounce out; it had somehow bounced against something, even if they couldn’t see it. It just seemed incredible to everyone, but it was probably a very normal physical phenomenon. As a matter of fact, at school tomorrow, someone would have probably figured it out.

“Thanks Atavus.” He patted the old man’s hand. “I’m sure you’re right. It just looked so strange.”

“I’m glad you won.” Atavus grabbed his grandson’s hand. Then he suddenly perked up. “This means you go to State, doesn’t it?” “Yeah. It will be us against the Titans next week.”

“Excellent! Excellent! You know, Ethan would be proud of you.” Atavus settled back down against his pillows. His hand shook and struggled with the oxygen mask at the side of his bed. He managed to put the cup over his mouth and breathe. The old man’s body visibly relaxed as his eyes closed.

Darren took the oxygen cup from the mouth of the old man and set it back to the side of the bed; it was obvious that his grandfather had drifted off to sleep. He had wanted to tell his grandfather about the mirage he’d seen – the floating girl above the bleachers. If anyone was going to believe a story like that it would be
Atavus. He sat back in his chair at the side of the bed and watched the feeble rise and fall of his grandfather’s chest.

“He probably wouldn’t believe it either,” Darren said aloud. “A floating ghost at a basketball game?”

He prepared to stand up, when his grandfather’s hand shot out and grabbed him by the arm. It was a surprisingly strong grip.

“A ghost?” he wheezed. “A transparent image, floating in the air?” Each word was a struggle for the man to get out. His eyes were opened wide and riveted on his grandson.

“Atavus, calm down.” He stood and tried to comfort his grandfather.

“You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“What did you see boy? What did you feel?” His face grew chalkier than normal but his grip remained firm on his arm. “Did it speak to you? Tell me!”

Darren was startled by the old man’s passion. Suddenly Atavus released his arm and doubled over with a stream of racking coughs. Their violence shook his entire body as he struggled to breathe.

“Mom, Dad!” Darren yelled, but they were both rushing in through the door before he finished.
Matt moved for the oxygen and adjusted the flow. Darren’s mother, Amy, went to Atavus and tried to soothe him. “Calm down Atavus.” She rubbed his back. “Try to relax while I get your nebulizer.”

Darren backed away as his parents administered to his grandfather. Why had Atavus gotten so upset?


“I was just telling him about the game.” Darren lamely replied. He couldn’t tell his father about the ghost.

“Sit back Atavus.” Amy had the nebulizer in her hand and was trying to put it up to Atavus’ face. “Inhale this,” she instructed. Atavus continued to cough so hard they seemed ready to split him in two.

Matt brought the oxygen up to his father’s mouth, but Darren’s mother shooed it away.

“He needs to clear his airway, give the nebulizer time to work.” She knew what to do and the first thing was to get his airways cleared of the mucus. Right now he was panicking, which was causing his airway to constrict and not allow the air into his lungs. She worked with him, let him cough, and after about five very long minutes, he was able to breathe again. Finally she allowed Matt to hand
Atavus the oxygen mask. He drew in the pure oxygen and lay back against his pillow, completely drained.

Darren’s parents ushered him out of the room. They both appeared grave, and shared a look between them. Neither paid much attention to him, which as far as Darren was concerned was okay. He didn’t want them delving any deeper into what had upset his grandfather.

Normally after a game he would have headed over to Andrea’s house, or at least called her. Instead, his mind was too full of the happenings of the day. A nook off of the kitchen housed some pantry items and a small desk. At the desk was the family computer. Darren settled in and Googled the topic ghost.

At first, the search returned images of “ghosts.” But the images didn’t resemble what he had seen. They were translucent, and whitish in color, and very vague in facial details. There was the confederate ghost that hovered to the right of a man in a cemetery; but it was very indistinct, with barely the form that suggested it was human. He checked out the Toys R Us Ghost, which had been featured on a television show. It was an infrared image of a young man leaning against some lockers. But this image had lighting behind it so that, though the image was clearly a young man, there were no distinctive facial features. The girl Darren had seen was very distinct, and had been normal in color – granted she
wore a black dress – but had normal skin tone, and her hair was obviously blonde. And her eyes were that very vivid color of green.

As the night wore on, Darren read articles about ghost sightings, and saw “real ghost” images. But nothing satisfied him. There was even a site for the movie “Ghost” with Patrick Swayze. He remembered seeing that movie, and thought that portrayed what ghosts looked like better than what these supposed ‘real’ ghosts looked like. But of course, it was only a movie.

Finally, he gave it up around eleven and headed to bed. He stopped by Atavus’ room thinking, now that his grandfather was calmer, perhaps he could ask what had upset him earlier. He also wondered what Atavus might know about what he had experienced. Maybe Mike was right, perhaps their family did have a ghost, and that’s what had agitated the old man. In any case, when he glanced in his grandfather’s room he could hear him snoring. He sighed, turned around and headed up the stairs to his own bedroom.

Despite the lateness of the hour, he had a hard time getting to sleep. He wanted to believe that it really was dehydration that had led to him seeing things, just as Mike suggested. But she was so distinct, so clear. Would a mirage be like that? But then, what was the alternative to that belief – that he’d actually seen a real live – well not live, perhaps – but a real ghost hovering in the school gym?
He wished Ethan were still alive. He’d always been able to talk to Ethan. Ethan used to listen to everyone, especially Atavus. He was among the few who didn’t think his grandfather was going senile. The two of them had often had long talks together that Darren had wished he’d been part of.

The idea of senility brought a disturbing alternative to mind. If he hadn’t seen a real ghost, perhaps it was because something was seriously wrong inside his head. What if there was something in the genes? What if something inside him was broken, or breaking? What if he was becoming delusional like his grandfather?