

Blue Noon

Midnighters

Scott Westerfeld

 HarperCollins e-books

**To John and Jan, and
Niki, for making me
part of the family**

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1

8:20 A.M.

PREDATOR

Bixby High's late bell shrieked in the distance, like something wounded and ready to be cut from the herd.

Rex Greene was always late these days, stumbling in confusion from one class to another, late with his father's pills or forgetting them altogether. But the worst was getting up for school. It didn't help that he'd unplugged his clock a few nights ago, unable to sleep with the soft buzzing sound it made all night, like a mosquito hovering just out of arm's reach. His newly acute hearing had turned every electronic contraption into something whiny and annoying.

But it was more than just the clock's noise; it was what it *meant*, with its false day of twenty-four hours. Since what had happened to him in the desert, Rex had started to feel time as something marked out in the sky—the rise and fall of the sun, the spinning stars, the interlocking ratios of the light moon and the dark.

The rest of the world still had their clocks, though, so Melissa had banged on his window again this morning, dragging him rudely out of his strange new dreams.

"Smells like...assembly," she said as they pulled into the school parking lot, her head tipping back a bit, nostrils flaring.

All Rex could smell was crumbling vinyl—the upholstery of Melissa's crappy Ford broken down by thirty-odd Oklahoma summers—and gasoline fumes leaking up through the floorboard from the car's rumbling engine. Humans loved their oil, a flash of darkling memory informed him. They scoured the desert for it, used it to make clever things like plastic and gasoline....

Rex shook his head to clear it. On mornings like these, when he'd dreamed of Stone Age hunts all night, he had more trouble concentrating than usual. The old knowledge inside him seemed more real than his sixteen years of human memories. Sometimes Rex wondered if he would ever recover from what the darklings had done, the half change they'd effected before Jessica had rescued him.

Was he gradually healing from the experience? Or was the darkness they'd left inside him like a virus, slowly growing stronger?

As Melissa maneuvered the Ford into a parking place, Rex spotted a few stragglers making their way into the gymnasium entrance. The sound of an amplified voice echoed out from the propped-open double doors.

"Crap, that's right," Melissa said, gripping the steering wheel tighter. "Pep rally today."

Rex groaned and closed his eyes. He hadn't faced anything like this since the change, and he wasn't looking forward to it. The thought of all those bodies pressed in

close around him, chanting together, brought a trickle of nerves into his stomach.

“Don’t worry,” Melissa said, reaching across to take his hand. “I’ll be there.”

At her touch, with no more insistence than a cool breeze, a calmness fell across Rex. His stomach stopped roiling, his mind growing still as Melissa’s serenity poured into him.

A shudder passed through Rex; her strength became his.

Funny. A month ago it had been Rex who’d had to talk Melissa through the beginning-of-football-season pep rally. Now she was the sane one, and he was...

What, exactly?

He didn’t know yet, and Rex hated not knowing. There were no halflings in the lore, much less recovering halflings.

Bad dreams last night?

Rex smiled and turned to face Melissa. The words had come through as clear as speech. They could have whole conversations now without her uttering a sound.

Her control was almost perfect, not a leaked thought anywhere, so different from the vomited rush of fear and pain that had struck him when they had first begun to touch each other. Although sometimes Rex missed those early experiments, the terrifying moments when he saw all of Melissa at once.

When his mind was focused, he hardly had to speak himself; Melissa simply pulled the words from him. But this morning he was too much of a wreck.

“Yeah, some bad dreams,” Rex said aloud. “But not all of them.”

The hunting dreams had been sweet—the cold, patient hunger as he tracked prey for days across the plain, anticipation building as the weakest were cut from the group, and then the burning rush of the kill.

But of course, there’d been those *other* dreams as well, memories of when the clever little monkeys had started hunting back. The beginning of the end.

“Jeez, lighten up,” Melissa said, pulling her hand away and rubbing it, as if to wring out the ancient horror she’d felt in his mind. “I think someone forgot to drink his coffee this morning.”

“Sorry, Cowgirl. Yeah, I guess I could use a cup. Or six.” Rex shook his head again. His brain felt stuffed full, his own thoughts almost crowded out by the memories that the darklings had implanted to make him one of them. “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever get back to normal.”

Melissa snorted. “When were you ever normal, Rex? When were any of us?”

“Well, maybe not normal,” Rex admitted. “But I’d settle for human.”

She laughed and touched his shoulder, and he felt a spark of her pleasure even through the fabric of his long black coat. “You’re totally human, Rex. Trust me on that one.”

“Glad you think so,” he said, smiling.

Melissa’s fingers stayed on his shoulder, drumming out a nervous rhythm, and her glance strayed to the open gymnasium door. Rex realized that however much her control had improved, the thought of enduring a pep rally still made Melissa anxious.

“You’ll be okay,” he said softly, pulling her closer.

She turned to him, and their lips met.

At first Rex felt serenity in the warmth of their kiss, her new calmness and self-control flowing into him. But then Melissa allowed her composure to slip, and it was

like their first time. Everything inside her crashed out in a torrent: the enduring wounds of all those years alone, memories of the constant hammering of other minds, the old fear of being touched. She let it well up and spill over, pouring into him. Rex was overwhelmed for a moment, but then he felt his damaged surety rallying, responding to her need. He twisted in the car seat to take her shoulders, and the kiss built, his strength becoming hers, until he felt Melissa's mastery of herself return.

She sighed as they separated. "I say again, Rex: fully human."

Rex leaned back into his seat, smiling. The heavy dread that he had felt since waking and realizing that it was a school day—and a Monday at that—had lifted from him at last.

Melissa's fingers played across his cheek, and she grinned. "You taste electric now, like you do after a jolt of coffee."

"Hmm. Maybe kissing is sort of like nature's coffee."

"Actually, Rex, *coffee* is nature's coffee. It is a plant, you know."

"Ah, right. Good point, Cowgirl."

He looked at the gymnasium door. A pep rally couldn't be *that* bad, could it? Better than the hated first-period math class it would replace, and he could use the time to cram for his upcoming English test. One thing about carrying ancient memories of an elder species around in your head, it could royally screw up your interpretation of *Catcher in the Rye*.

Rex checked his backpack. No English book. "Listen, I have to go by my locker. Save me a seat?"

"Back row?"

"Of course." He snorted. "I haven't changed that much."

She nodded slowly, then her eyes narrowed. "Should I come with you?"

"Don't worry about me." Rex ran his tongue across his teeth. They never felt as sharp as he expected them to, the canines never as long as they should be. Phantom limbs itched sometimes at night, as if parts of his body were missing.

But Rex took a deep breath and forced those thoughts from his mind. He couldn't complain about every discomfort. He'd been granted something that any seer would die for: a chance to learn more about the darklings than the lore could ever teach, to understand them from the *inside*. Maybe his kidnapping and transformation had been a gift in disguise.

As long as his human half stayed in control...

"It's okay, Cowgirl," he said. "I can take care of myself."

The hallway was as unpleasantly bright as always, sunlight spilling through the doors, the fluorescents buzzing overhead in a constant drone.

Rex squinted in the light, reminding himself to buy sunglasses. That was one advantage since the change: his vision was much sharper. Rex didn't even need his eyeglasses at school anymore. A strange kind of Focus clung to everything here: the marks of human passage and invention, a million prey trails piled on top of one another, making everything crystal clear and somehow...appetizing.

It was almost too much. Sometimes he wished that school could be blurry and soft again, distanced behind the thick glasses he'd worn since third grade. Everything was

so sharp now. It wasn't just the buzzing fluorescents that annoyed him; Rex could feel the fire alarms and public address system behind the walls, those razor-fine wires that clever humans always laced their buildings with. It felt like being in a metal cage with electrified bars.

And human places were so *ugly*. Rex noticed for the first time in his two years at Bixby High that the tiled floors were the exact same yellow hue as his father's nicotine-stained fingers. Whose idea of interior decorating was that?

At least the halls had been emptied by the pep rally.

As he headed for his locker, Rex ran a hand across his scalp, feeling it prickle his palm. When Jessica's white flame had freed him from the darkling body, big patches of his hair had burned away, his gothy haircut totaled. So Rex had cropped it to a half inch all over with the electric clippers that his father had once used to shorten the thick coat of their dog, Magnetosphere, for summer.

Rex's own reflection still brought him to a halt when he passed shop windows, and he found himself touching his scalp all the time, fascinated by the hairs standing up so straight, as hard and even as Astroturf under his palm. Maybe this meant that Melissa was right, that he was still human: even after all the other changes that had racked his body and mind, a new haircut still took some getting used to.

Rex reached his locker, letting his fingers open it by feel. The tricky part was not thinking of the numbers, that cleverest and most dangerous of human inventions. Fortunately, there weren't any multiples of the Aversion in his combination. It was hard enough already when his fingers faltered, and Rex had to start over, forcing his way through the sequence number by number, like some freshman on his first day of school.

When he looked at the locker's dial, he hardly even saw the Aversion anymore—it appeared as a wavering blurry spot between twelve and fourteen, edited out by his mind, like an FBI informant's face on the news.

He was thinking of taking Dess up on her offer to pull apart the lock and hack it, changing the combination to a smooth string of twelves and twenty-fours. She was already doing his math homework these days. Too many combinations awaited on every page that could paralyze the darkling half of his mind, leaving him with a snapped pencil and a pounding headache.

Math was deadly now.

Success on the first try. He heard the tiny click of the last cylinder lining up and pulled the locker open happily. But distracted by his thoughts of numbers, Rex realized too late that someone had crept up behind him. A familiar scent swept through him, setting off old alarm bells, fearful and violent memories suddenly rising up.

A fist struck the locker, slamming it shut again. The sound echoed through the empty hallway as he spun around.

"Hey, Rex. Lost your specs?"

Timmy Hudson. That explained the trickle of fear in Rex's stomach—the boy had beaten him up almost every day back in fifth grade. As strong as any flash of darkling memory, Rex recalled being trapped behind the school one day by Timmy and three friends, punched in the gut so hard that for a week it had hurt to piss. Though it had been years since Timmy had done anything worse to Rex than slam him against the wall, the tightening in Rex's stomach remained as knife-edged as it had ever been.

“Didn’t lose them,” Rex answered, his own voice weak and plaintive in his ears. “Don’t wear glasses anymore.”

Timmy grinned and stood closer, the smell of sour milk sharp on his breath. “Contact lenses? Huh. The funny thing is, makes you look like even more of a retard.”

Rex didn’t answer, struck with the sudden realization that Timmy Hudson was looking *up* at him. At some point he had grown taller than his old nemesis. When had *that* happened?

“You must think you’re getting pretty cool these days, huh?” Timmy punctuated the last grunted word with a hard shove, and a combination lock rammed into the small of Rex’s back, hard as the barrel of a gun. The feel of it focused his mind, and he felt his lips begin to twitch, pulling away from his teeth. His mouth felt suddenly dry.

Something was moving through Rex, something stronger than him.

He shook his head *no*. He was Rex Greene, a seer, not an animal.

“What’s the matter? Too cool to talk to me these days?” Timmy laughed, then squinted up at Rex’s scalp. He reached out and ran one hand across its bristly surface.

“And a new ‘do?” Timmy shook his head sadly. “You trying to look tough? Like everyone doesn’t remember what a little pussy you are?”

Rex found himself staring at Timmy’s throat, where the blood pulsed close to the surface. One shallow rip through the frail skin and life would spill out, warm and nourishing.

“Think your little extreme makeover makes you Mr. Cool, don’t you?”

Rex found himself smiling at the words. What had happened to him was so much more extreme than anything Timmy could imagine.

“What’s so funny?”

“Your weakness.” Rex blinked. The words had just popped out of his mouth.

Timmy took half a step back, blank-faced with shock for a moment. He looked one way down the empty hall, then the other, as if checking the reaction of some invisible audience.

“My *what?*” he finally spat.

Rex nodded slowly. He could *smell* it now, he realized, and the scent of weakness had triggered something inside him, something that threatened to spin out of control.

His mind grasped for some way to master himself. He tried to think of the lore symbols, but they had all flown out of his brain. All he had left were words. Maybe if he could keep talking...

“You’re the kind we cut from the herd.”

Timmy’s eyebrows went up. “Say what, retard?”

“You’re weak and afraid.”

“You think I’m afraid, Rex?” The boy tried to put on an amused smile, but only half his face obeyed. The left side seemed frozen, taut and wide-eyed, his fear leaking out into his expression. “Of *you?*”

Rex saw that Timmy’s pulse was quickening, his hands shaking.

Weakness.

“I can smell it on you...” The words faded as Rex finally lost control. He watched the rest of what happened like a passenger in his own body. He took a step forward until his face was as close as Timmy had dared come a moment before.

The fear in Rex’s stomach had changed into something else, something hot and

cruel that surged through his chest and up into his jaw. His teeth parted, lips pulling back so far that he felt them split, baring his teeth and half an inch of gums. His whole body grew as taut as one long trembling muscle, swaying for balance like a snake ready to strike, arms out and fingers locked in rigid claws.

He made a noise then, right in Timmy's face, a horrific sound that Rex had never heard before, much less produced himself. His mouth still open wide, the back of his throat cinched tightly closed, a breath forcing its way out with a long and shuddering *hissss*—a mix of fingernails on a chalkboard, the shriek of a hawk, and the last rattle of a punctured lung. The noise seemed to coil in the air for a moment, wrapping around Timmy's shuddering frame, squeezing the breath from him.

The hiss lingered in the empty hallway like the echoes of a shout, disappearing into the buzzing of the fluorescent lights.

Timmy didn't move. The twisted half smile stayed on his face, muscles frozen, as if some careless surgeon had snipped a nerve and he was stuck with the half-formed expression for the rest of his life.

"Weakness," Rex said softly, the hiss still ringing in his voice.

His body softened then, whatever demon had slipped into him departing as swiftly as it had come. His jaw relaxed, and Rex's muscles lost their inhuman rigidity—but Timmy still didn't move. He looked thoroughly frozen, like a rat that had just lost a staring contest with a python.

He didn't make another sound as Rex walked away.

Halfway to the gym, Rex's heart was still pounding with the weirdness of what had just happened. He felt elated, confident, and powerful, finally cleansed of the fear that had stalked him through the halls of Bixby High School every day for the last two years.

But he was also afraid. He'd tried to fend off the darkling part of him, but it had taken control nonetheless.

Still, the experience had left him feeling so *good*—purposeful and somehow more complete. And he hadn't really lost it, had he? The predator had drawn its claws, but it hadn't used them. He hadn't struck for the pulse in Timmy's throat, the easy kill of the straggler.

Maybe the darkling side of him maintained a balance with his human half. Perhaps Rex Greene was still sane.

For now.



2

8:31 A.M.

PEP RALLY

She watched the pep rally with awestruck fascination.

Melissa had been forced to attend dozens of these things before, of course, but she'd never really *seen* one. Battered by the mind noise, huddled in the back with eyes closed and fists clenched, the old Melissa had understood pep rallies about as well as a bird sucked through a jet engine comprehended aircraft design.

But the crowd no longer terrorized her, the horde of other minds no longer threatened to erase her own. Using the memories Madeleine had given her, the generations of technique passed on among mindcasters, she could rise above the tempest, ride its swells like a buoy in a storm.

Finally she could *taste* it all....

The football team strutting in Lycra before the crowd, their testosterone and bluster mixed with a bitter backwash flavor—the growing realization that once again, they were going to lose every game this year. The clique of pretty girls clustered together a few rows down, surrounded by a force field of disdain for all the nobodies around them—unaware of how much the nobodies hated them right back. The bored minds of teachers stationed around the edges of the gym, jonesing for cigarettes and more coffee, quietly relieved that first period had been superseded. The group of freshman boys camped on the first row of bleachers, watching the cheerleaders' skirts fly up, their horny thoughts as sharp as sweat licked off an upper lip.

Melissa found it all hysterically funny. Why hadn't she ever understood this simple fact before? Why hadn't anyone told her? High school wasn't a trial by fire or some ordeal that had to be survived.

It was all a big joke. You just had to provide the laugh track.

Through the crowd noise the minds of the other midnighters reached her, their various flavors coming through loud and clear. The three of them sat together—about as far away from Melissa as they could. In particular, she tasted every cold glance from Dess, who was glowering behind dark glasses, her mind still full of acid hatred for what had happened ten days ago.

Melissa did feel bad about that—no one knew better than she how vile it was having your mind wrenched open against your will. But there hadn't been any choice. If she hadn't gone in and dredged up Dess's secrets, Rex would be a full-fledged darkling now instead of...

Well, instead of whatever he had become.

Jonathan and Jessica sat close to each other, their fingers intertwined, separated from everyone around them by their coupleness. Of course, they would turn and talk to

Dess every once in a while, throwing her a bone. Jessica had witnessed what Melissa had done to Dess and felt almost as bad as if she'd done it herself. Her thoughts were often layered with a sickly survivor's guilt: *If only I had stopped Melissa, blah, blah, blah...*

Of course, Jessica's indignation wasn't nearly as bad as what lurked in Jonathan's mind. Ever since he'd touched Melissa and felt what it was like to be her, a rancid pity polluted him from head to toe.

Of course, the joke was on him. Because being Melissa *didn't* feel like that anymore.

It felt sweet.

"Sucker," she whispered, and let herself be buoyed again by the chanting crowd.

Loverboy made his way in about fifteen minutes late, slipping easily past the teacher monitoring the door.

Melissa tasted his mind through the chaotic energies of the pep rally. Despite all the confusion he carried now, Rex's thoughts still reached her on their own special channel, even clearer than those of the other midnighters'. She knew instantly that something unexpected had happened to him in the empty hallways of the school. His mind was bright and buzzing, like just after they'd kissed.

But whatever had happened had also unnerved him. Melissa felt him scan the crowd anxiously, relaxing only when he spotted her atop the closest bleachers to the door. He made his way up with soft, effortless steps, as fluid as a cat across a rooftop.

Melissa smiled. Watching Rex show off his new feline grace was one of her great pleasures.

"Get what you wanted?" she asked as he settled beside her.

"Oh, my English book." He shook his head. "Forgot all about it, actually. Had some trouble on the way."

"Yeah, I figured that." She could taste it more clearly now: Underneath his excitement Rex was bubbling with the darkling flavor he sometimes had now—the sour lemon of a young hunter's mind jazzed by the smell of prey. "Hmm. Didn't eat anybody, did you?"

"Not quite. But it was a pretty close thing." He held out his hand, palm up. "Want to see?" His eyes flashed.

"Of course, Loverboy." She smiled and placed her hand over his.

The darkling taste redoubled, shuddering through her acid and electric, like kissing an old car battery that still carried some juice. The surging taste of it blotted out the insipid flavors of the pep rally.

She felt Rex's new predatory confidence, his worries about losing control, the fading buzz of his wild transformation. Someone had threatened him, she realized, had actually dared to get into his face. Sucker.

And there was something else...an unexpected cluster of memories carried on top of Rex's spinning thoughts. Not a darkling flavor, but something fearful and human.

Melissa pulled her hand away, staring into the whorls of her palm to puzzle over the strange images: a rattler cut in two by someone's dad in a backyard, its fangs snapping together in its death throes. The two snake halves squirming for thirty

minutes on either side of the shovel that had bisected them, as if trying to rejoin each other and wreak revenge.

Melissa blinked. “Someone’s afraid of snakes?”

“Timmy Hudson is.” Rex smiled, showing too many teeth. “Very.”

She shook her head. “What the hell?”

Rex stared down at the cheerleaders, who were piling themselves into a shaky pyramid. His glassy eyes gazed straight through them, into some new mix of midnighter lore and implanted ancient memories.

“Well, you know how darklings take our nightmares and use them against us?”

“Of course I do, Rex.” Every night Melissa tasted the old minds out across the desert. And she had personally witnessed their shape-shifting into all creatures vile and hideous—worms, spiders, slugs. “That’s why they always pull the tarantula trip on you.”

“Yeah, tarantulas.” He nodded thoughtfully. “Well, Timmy Hudson was bugging me. And he’s afraid of snakes, it turns out. Ever since he was little, when his dad killed a rattler in the backyard and then brought Timmy out to take a look at the results. So I sort of got...snaky.”

He glanced at her, his tongue darting out for a split second. Then he smiled.

Melissa noticed that Rex’s chapped lower lip was split, his chin a little reddened with wiped-off blood. She reached up and touched it, felt the fading tension in his jaw muscle. “Okay, Loverboy. But how did you know that? About Timmy? You and he were never exactly friends.”

Rex shook his head. “I just knew.”

“But *how*, Rex? I’m the mindcaster here, remember? How did *you* get into someone’s nightmares?”

He turned away again, staring at the pep festivities without seeing them. His mind radiated a quiet confidence, an intensity Melissa had never felt from him before, not during daylight hours. His strength was flavored, though, with tremors of uncertainty, bitter as the dregs of Madeleine’s tea. Rex felt a lot like a young trucker Melissa had once tasted on the highway, driving an eighteen-wheeler for the first time with no one else in the cab—heady with an overdose of power, but nervous that the rig was about to hurtle off the road.

Finally he answered. “That’s what darklings do.”

The pep rally dragged on for ages. Announcements were made about bake sales and car washes and school plays. Team banners were raised. The members of last year’s district-winning chess club got a few seconds of applause—a token suggestion that being smart might actually be a *good* thing. And gradually the rally began to lose its pep. Even the cheerleaders started to look bored, pom-poms wilting in their hands.

Then came the part when everyone chanted together.

“Beat North Tulsa. Beat North Tulsa,” the gnome-like principal began. He stepped back from the microphone, raising his tiny fist in rhythm with the words. Gradually the chant built, louder and louder, until the gymnasium thundered with the sound.

This ritual was supposed to channel the whole school’s “spirit” into the football

team, transforming them from a bunch of seventeen-year-old boys into the champions of Bixby High.

The funny thing was, the concept wasn't total nonsense. You could see it on the team's faces as they listened: it did affect them, as if a gathered mass of humans really could lend its strength to a few zit-faced boys. Melissa often wondered if the daylighter who had invented pep rallies actually knew something about how mindcasting worked.

This part of pep rallies had always terrified Melissa in the past—the assembled minds uniting their energy in the chant, every strand of individual thought swamped by the animal imperatives of the pack: *Stay with the herd. Safety in numbers. Kill the enemy. Beat North Tulsa.*

She looked down across the fists rising and falling in rhythm, felt the beat of stomping feet resonating through the bleachers. The clique of pretty girls had lost the force field around them, dissolving into the crowd. The freshman boys in the first row were taking it seriously, no longer ogling the cheerleaders. Even Jessica Day and Flyboy had joined in, trying to act halfhearted but overtaken by the power of the mob.

Melissa nervously took a few deep breaths. This pep rally was a joke, she reminded herself. The crowd didn't know what they were doing, and not one of the minds in this gymnasium matched hers for sheer power. Just because they'd found a meaningless football game to channel themselves into didn't make them stronger than her.

She steadily gained control again.

Then Melissa noticed Rex sniffing the air, eyes twitching as his nostrils flared. The chant was making him anxious as well.

"It's like a hunt," he hissed. "This is how they got themselves ready in the old days."

Melissa touched Rex's hand and for an awful moment felt the crowd as he did. Little humans, weak and frail—but *so many of them*. It had been rituals like this one that had helped them conquer their fear of the darklings. And one day they had begun to hunt their own predators, packs of humans armed with fire and their sharp, clever stones.

Finally a band of them had gotten lucky, taking down a young darkling that had thought itself invulnerable. And some of the dread that the master species had always depended on was lost forever. The oldest minds still remembered that moment, when the balance had begun to shift. Humans had slowly become more confident, scratching pictures of their kills onto rocks and into mud, the first hated symbols of their mastery.

Melissa pulled her hand away, burned by the memory.

Maybe this pep rally wasn't such a joke. After all, high school was all about the oldest human bonds—the tribe, the pack, the hunting party.

Rex's hands twitched. He was struggling with the part of him that wanted to flee.

"You need to leave?" she whispered.

He shook his head grimly. "No. This is important. Have to learn to keep control."

Melissa sighed. Rex could be a moron sometimes.

She often remembered a line she'd read once on a bathroom wall: *That which does not kill us makes us stronger*. As Melissa watched the sweat building on Rex's upper lip, she knew that he was making the same mistake as the bathroom wall guy.

Not everything made you stronger. It was possible to survive, yet still be crippled for your trouble. Sometimes it was okay to run away, to skip the test, to chicken out. Or at least to get some help.

She firmly took his hand, not letting him pull away, and reached inside herself for a place that Madeleine had shown her, an old mindcaster trick for chilling out. Melissa closed her eyes and entered Rex, gently pushing the crowd's chant out of his mind.

She felt him relax, his fear of the crowd—and of the beast inside him—slipping away.

“Whoa,” he said softly. “Thanks, Cowgirl.”

“Any time, Loverboy.”

“Okay. How about tonight?”

She opened her eyes. “Hmm?”

“Maybe later we can—” Rex's voice choked off, his grip suddenly tightening. “Something's coming.”

“What do you—?” she started, but then she felt it too and slammed her eyes shut again.

A taste was thundering toward them across the desert, vast and ancient and bitter, tumbling over itself in a rushing wave. It grew stronger as it advanced, like an avalanche pulling down more snow from the mountainside, burying everything in its wake.

Then it struck, washing through the gymnasium, sweeping away the puny energies of the pep rally, obliterating the surrounding mind noise of Bixby leaking in through the walls. It consumed everything. Only Melissa's connection with Rex remained, his shock and alarm reverberating through her like the echoes of a gunshot.

She opened her eyes and saw what had happened. The blue light, the frozen bodies, a leaping cheerleader hovering suspended in the air. The whole world struck by...

Silence.

Melissa looked at her watch in amazement. It was just after 9 A.M.

But the blue time was here.



3

9:03 A.M.

BLUE MONDAY

Midnight gravity flowed into Jessica.

She clenched Jonathan's hand harder. "What the...?" Her voice trailed off into the sudden and overwhelming silence, her heart pounding as her eyes scanned the frozen pep rally.

Everything was blue.

The shiny Lycra uniforms of the football team, the Bixby town seal in the center of the basketball court, the motionless tendrils of a pom-pom thrust into the air—it had all turned the color of midnight. And everything was perfectly still.

"Jonathan?" Jessica looked into his face, hoping to catch some glimmer of comprehension. Maybe this had happened before here in Bixby, a weird hiccup of the blue time, and Rex had simply forgotten to tell her about it.

Jonathan didn't answer. His eyes were wide with shock.

"This is messed up," Dess confirmed in a quiet voice.

Jessica gripped the edge of the bleacher she sat on, felt the grainy reality of the wood. This was not a dream—this was the blue time.

Her eye caught movement across the gym. Rex and Melissa were slowly rising, looking strangely isolated among the frozen human forms.

His paralysis suddenly broken, Jonathan let out a cry and sprang out of his seat. Jessica instinctively clung to his hand, and as he left his feet, he pulled her softly into the air after him—they were both light as feathers.

"Jonathan!"

"What the hell?" His voice faded as midnight gravity carried them helplessly up and over the crowd, spinning around each other like two balls on a string. "Is this really...?"

"Yeah, really happening," Jessica managed, gripping his hand still harder. The floor looked miles below, and she flashed back to Climbing Day in gym class—peering down from the top of the thick, knotted rope, terrified of falling.

As their flight peaked and they began to descend, reflexes honed by countless hours of flying together kicked in. Jonathan twisted to bring their spin to a halt, and as they settled back onto the gym floor—right on the Bixby seal, as if they'd been aiming for it—Jessica's knees bent for a soft landing.

She looked back up at the bleachers and swallowed. The frozen crowd were all staring right at her and Jonathan. It reminded Jessica of her least-favorite recurring nightmare: being in a play she hadn't rehearsed, the motionless audience waiting for her first line. It was stunning to see so many people captured by midnight. Their faces

were waxy and pale, their eyes lifeless, like an army of plastic dummies.

“Never seen this many stiffs before.” Melissa’s soft words carried across the gym, echoing Jessica’s thoughts.

“Outside, quick!” Rex called. He was running down the bleachers, jumping over the frozen bodies like hurdles. Dess and Melissa followed him toward the door to the parking lot.

Jessica looked at Jonathan, who shrugged. “Might as well see what’s in the sky,” he said.

“Oh, right.” If this were midnight, the dark moon would be up there, bathing the world in its cold blue light.

But this *wasn’t* midnight. This was a Monday morning pep rally, which was just about as far away from the magic of the blue time as you could get.

“Come on,” Jonathan said, his knees bending.

They jumped together, covering the distance to the door in one easy leap, landing just as Rex got there. The three of them burst out into the parking lot together, staring up at the sky.

Behind a few frozen and wispy clouds, the dark moon was huge and fully risen. Its vast bulk seemed perfectly centered, blotting out the whole sky except for a thin sliver around the horizon, hiding the sun. A few white stars glittered at its edges, their light dulled, as if they were being squashed down against the earth by the huge moon’s weight.

Suddenly Jessica needed the feel of solid ground under her feet. She slipped her fingers from Jonathan’s hand, letting normal gravity fall back across her. Dizzied by the weird, absent light of the moon, she dropped her eyes down to the asphalt.

Its cracked surface shone uncanny blue.

Dess and Melissa charged through the door, staggering to a halt as they stared upward.

“This can’t be happening,” Rex murmured.

“Yeah,” Dess said, gazing at her own blue hand. “But it kind of...*is*.”

For a long moment they all stood there in silence. Jonathan pushed off from the ground nervously, rising a few feet into the air.

Jessica checked her watch. The numbers were still pulsing: 9:05 A.M. Just like during a normal midnight hour, her flame-bringer’s magic kept its electronic numbers flashing.

How many minutes had it lasted so far? Two?

“The moon isn’t moving,” Rex said.

“Isn’t what?” Dess asked.

His skyward gaze stayed steady, his eyes flashing violet. “It’s just stuck up there, halfway across.”

“How can you tell?” Jessica asked, glancing up at the huge, baleful eye above them. The dark moon crossed the sky much faster than the sun, taking only an hour to rise and fall, but it was still like watching a minute hand move on a clock. “Isn’t it sort of too slow to see?”

“For you, maybe.” He smiled. “But I *am* a seer, you know.”

“Oh, right.” Jessica glanced at Jonathan, who shrugged back at her. These days it was easy to forget that Rex was gifted with special sight and deep knowledge of the

lore. The transformation out in the desert had left him...different. Lately his gaze was so freaked out and wild-eyed that he seemed more like a stoner than a seer.

“So the moon didn’t rise?” Dess asked. “It just appeared out of nowhere?”

“Or it rose really quick.” Rex glanced at his own watch; on a midnighter’s wrist, windups worked in the blue hour. “We got out here in less than three minutes.”

“Why is it such a big deal what the moon’s doing?” Jessica asked quietly. “I mean, isn’t this all completely screwed up anyway?”

“The moon makes the secret hour, as far as we know.” Rex looked up again as he answered her, staring at the sky with a frown. “If it’s not moving, there’s no way to tell how long this will last.”

“Oh.” Jessica glanced at Jonathan, who had jumped to the top of a school bus to look around. “Um, then maybe...”

“Spot the problem, Rex,” Dess said. “Let’s do some math: zero velocity multiplied by *any* amount of time equals zero movement. What if the moon’s just *stuck* up there?”

“Stuck?” Jessica said softly. “Like, forever?”

“I didn’t say forever.” Rex dropped his eyes from the sky. “That would be... crazy.”

“This whole thing is crazy, Rex!” Dess cried. “It’s not midnight, except in Australia or somewhere, but it’s *blue*.”

“Yeah, what’s happening, Rex?” Jonathan said as he bounded softly back to the group.

Rex raised his hands. “Look, there’s nothing like this in the lore.” His voice stayed calm. “So I don’t know why you’re asking *me*.”

For a moment no one said anything, stunned by his words. Jessica realized that her jaw had dropped open. After all, that’s what you did when things got weird: you asked Rex what was going on.

With a cool seer’s gaze, he stared silently back at them for a moment, then smiled, his point made. “Okay, everyone, calm down and give Melissa some head space.” He turned to the mindcaster. “Can you feel Madeleine?”

“No, she’s staying hidden. But I bet you she’s just as freaked out as we are.”

“What about the darklings? Are they awake?”

Melissa stood in silence for a moment, eyes closed and head tilted back, casting her mind across the desert.

Jessica looked around at the others. It had been a while since the five of them had all been together. Probably since that night on the salt flats when everything had gone haywire—Rex kidnapped, Melissa thrown through the windshield of her car, and Dess...

Dess seemed the worst for it. She ate lunch with Jessica and Jonathan or alone these days—never with Rex and Melissa. She hadn’t forgiven the mindcaster for pillaging her memories that night.

Not that Jessica could blame her. Or blame Rex for being freaked out by his transformation into a halfling. And the scars on Melissa’s face from her accident still carried pink stitches.

But everyone seemed to have forgotten that Anatheia, the young seer who’d been turned into a halfling back in the old days, had *died* that night. Which was a lot worse

than anything that had happened to the rest of them.

Sometimes when Jessica watched the other midnighters interact, she felt like wearing a T-shirt with big letters on the front: GET OVER IT.

“They’re awake, all right,” Melissa said slowly. “I’m surprised you guys can’t hear them.”

“Hear them?” Rex glanced over his shoulder toward the badlands. “You mean they’re coming this way?”

Jessica reached for Disintegrator in her pocket, but it wasn’t there; she’d never expected to need the flashlight during the day. She had only Acariciandote, the bracelet Jonathan had given her. She reached to touch it, feeling the thirteen tiny charms dangling from her wrist.

Melissa shook her head. “Not coming, not moving much at all. Just so *loud*.” She winced, her face twisting into the pained expression she wore whenever too many people were around.

“Melissa,” Rex asked, “what do you mean by ‘loud’?”

“I mean screaming, howling, raising a ruckus.”

“As in afraid?”

Melissa shook her head. “No. As in celebrating.”

Jessica’s watch said 9:17 A.M., but it seemed like hours since the blue time had begun. The minutes seemed to drag along, as if time itself had become a formless, limping thing.

How could she even be sure if her watch was working right or not? It felt like they’d all been standing out there in the parking lot for hours.

“Get down from there!” Rex yelled again.

Jessica looked up and sighed. Jonathan was still on the roof of the school.

“I thought you said this could go on forever,” he shouted down.

“Yeah, or it could end any second!”

“Nah, midnight only comes in one-hour slices, Rex. You know that.” Jonathan laughed and took an arcing hop up to the top of the gym. From there he scanned the horizon, as if the Bixby skyline might hold some clue as to what was going on.

Jessica saw how high he was and swallowed. But she knew yelling at Jonathan was pointless. He always flew until the last moment of midnight, squeezing out every second of weightlessness; it hadn’t taken him long to convince himself that this unexpected blue time would last a solid hour. For Jonathan this wasn’t a terrifying mystery to be solved—it was a double helping of dessert, an extra recess, a free period spicing up an otherwise crappy Monday.

Jessica wanted to scream at him to quit being stupid, but if she sided with Rex in front of everyone else, Jonathan would probably stay up there until the world ended.

Unless, of course, it already had.

“Come on, Jonathan,” Melissa called up to him. “There’s nothing to see, and you really could get hurt.”

Jonathan frowned at her, but a moment later he stepped from the roof’s edge and floated down.

Jessica glanced sidelong at Melissa. The mindcaster had sounded so concerned,