

# THE SILVER RING

by Robert Swartwood

Smashwords Edition

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## Introduction

In 2000, I wrote a 22,000 word novella called *The Silver Ring*. I was eighteen. I submitted it to a major science fiction and fantasy magazine (I'm sure you can guess which one) and it was rightly rejected. In the rejection letter the editor said it was "ambitious." He was being too kind. What was ambitious about it was the length. At the time it was the longest thing I had ever written. But it needed work, and I knew it, and so I put it away and didn't think of it again until the spring of 2009 where I took it back out and rewrote the entire thing. Keeping the main storyline the same, I managed to cut out 4,000 words while adding in almost three times the amount of action.

As an experiment in self-promotion, I posted the novella online at <http://thesilverring.wordpress.com>. I even uploaded it onto Kindle. And now I am making it available for free on Smashwords.

Thank you for downloading *The Silver Ring*. I hope you enjoy it. If you do, please mention it to someone else you think might enjoy it too.

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# THE SILVER RING

## 1

Five minutes before the man with the gun entered the store, two little girls cut in front of me in line.

It wasn't really their fault. I was waiting in line, yeah, but this being a convenience store, the tabloid magazines were stored on a rack beneath the counter, and I was turned toward them, reading the ridiculous headlines about even more ridiculous celebrities. Above me, the speakers in the ceiling poured out some song by Bruce Springsteen.

It was summer and the temperature was stifling and for the past week after work I'd been stopping in for a slushie. The movie theater where I worked was having a promotion with this chain of stores: bring in your ticket stub for a free sixteen ounce soda or slushie. The theater floors always littered with stubs, I figured what the hey and stocked up on ticket stubs.

So I was standing there, a Cherry Coke slushie in one hand and reading a recent headline about Tom Cruise, when the man who'd been in line before me finished his purchase and turned away. The two girls stepped up and threw candy bars down on the counter.

The cashier—a woman named Dorothy, who never seemed to have a night off because I always saw her in here—gave me a look, as if asking, *You mind?*

I shrugged, took a sip of my slushie, and reached into my pocket for a ticket stub.

Among some change and a pack of gum, my fingers touched something solid that at first didn't make sense. Pulling it out, I realized it was a ring I'd found tonight while cleaning house seven, one of the biggest houses. It was silver and looked expensive and I'd meant to turn it in to one of the managers but then we'd gotten busy and I'd forgotten. And now here it was resting in the palm of my hand.

It had a neutral look to it, like it could belong to either a man or a woman, and I don't know why, but right then I needed to try it on. Just to see if it would fit, I told myself, and so I slipped it onto my finger. Not that I knew much about jewelry at seventeen, but it fit perfectly.

Before I had a chance to slide it back off the two girls shouted, "Thank you!" and suddenly turned away. The one closest bumped into me, causing me to drop my slushie. It hit the floor and spilled reddish-brown slush across the linoleum.

The girl who'd bumped me stood completely still, her mouth open and her eyes wide. The other girl had to cover her mouth as she giggled.

"I'm so sorry," the one girl said.

Outside, a car beeped, and the other girl said, "Come on, Mom's waiting," and then the girls were hurrying away, an electronic buzzer going *ding-dong* when they exited.

Dorothy was already coming out from behind the counter, a roll of paper towels in her hand.

"This is why I don't have any kids," she said with a sigh.

She looked to be forty, fifty years old. She had long gray hair. Because of the silver ring now on my finger, I happened to notice she wore nothing on any of her long fingers.

Tearing off a long piece of paper towel, she said, "Go get yourself another. I'll take care of this mess."

"It's okay, I don't mind cleaning this up. I'm used to it."

She was already lowering herself down to the floor, holding on to the counter for support. "Used to it. What does that mean?"

"I work over at the movie theater as an usher. I'm always cleaning up people's messes."

"Is that how you get all those ticket stubs? I just thought you liked watching movies."

I smiled. "To be honest, I don't really have much time to see movies."

She placed the long sheet of paper towel over the bulk of the mess, tore another sheet.

"Go get yourself another," she said. "I'll be fine here."

Deciding it best not to argue, I turned and headed toward the back of the store where they had the soda and slushie machines. I reached for one of the sixteen ounce cups but then stopped.

The ring on my finger was glowing.

"What—" I started to say.

And that was when the electronic buzzer went *ding-dong* and the man with the gun entered the store.

## 2

"Get up off the floor, bitch!" The voice was loud, angry, scared, hyped up on some kind of drug. "I want the money! Everything you got!"

The ring continued to glow and I just stared at it, completely calm.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” the man shouted, and while I couldn’t see the front of the store I somehow knew he had a .45 pointed at Dorothy’s face—Dorothy, who had her shaking hands up in the air and was having trouble getting to her feet.

“Please, please,” she started to sob.

The man with the gun struck her across the face, knocked her back down. She landed in the spilt slushie.

“Don’t fucking talk,” the man said. He was Hispanic and his eyes were red and his name was Irving and he needed only fifty bucks for another hit.

How I knew all that I didn’t know, just as I didn’t know why I started to slowly turn around, began to walk toward the front of the store.

“Please, please,” Dorothy sobbed.

“Bitch, you don’t shut your goddamn mouth, I’ll shoot you.”

Dorothy went silent.

“Now get the fuck up and get me my money.”

Her hands still raised, her bottom soaked with slushie, Dorothy managed to get into a sitting position, lean forward, place her weight on one knee, and stand.

“Fucking *hurry*,” Irving said. He’d waited outside until those two girls left, until there were no more cars in the parking lot, and knew the woman was alone (thought he knew, anyway), and he needed that money, he *needed* it.

Now standing on trembling legs, tears running down her face, Dorothy started to turn back toward the counter. But her sneaker skidded in more slushie, causing her to slip, to wave her arms wildly, and Irving, already hopped up and wired, thought she was trying to attack him and did the only thing he could do to protect himself.

He shot her three times in the back.

Dorothy stood still for an instant, her arms no longer waving, and then fell forward dead.

“Irving,” I said, standing now at the end of the chip and candy aisle, just a few feet away.

He turned, his eyes even wider, and unloaded the rest of the bullets into my chest.

I stumbled backward, my body went limp, my legs lost their strength, and I landed on the floor and knocked my head hard.

I didn't feel it.

I didn't feel anything.

I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, at one of those speakers hidden somewhere in the plaster tile. Bruce Springsteen was over—he'd been over—and now someone else was singing. I couldn't tell who it was or what they were saying.

All I could hear was my heart beating in my ears. That and Irving cursing again, the sound of his footsteps as he ran for the door, the electronic buzzer going *ding-dong*.

And then silence.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to do both so very much but I couldn't. I just lay there and stared at the ceiling, at that speaker emitting music of someone I didn't know, didn't recognize, and before I knew it I closed my eyes.

For an instant I saw darkness.

Then I saw a glow through my closed lids—somehow I knew it was the glow of the silver ring on my finger—and I opened my eyes again, took a breath, and sat up.

The first thing I did was touch my chest.

There was no blood. No bullet holes. Nothing.

The second thing I did was scramble to my feet and look wildly around the aisle, searching for those spent bullets.

Everything in that aisle—the bags of potato chips and pretzels, trays of candy bars and gum—looked no more disturbed than usual.

The ring glowed on my finger again—I somehow *felt* it glowing, like a pinprick—and I turned and hurried over to where Dorothy lay on the floor in a growing pool of blood and slushie.

She was clearly dead, the back of her blue uniform shirt ravaged where the bullets had entered.

"Dorothy," I said, like she would answer.

She didn't.

I stood back up, reaching into my pocket for my cell phone, when the silver ring glowed again.

I stared at it, then looked back at Dorothy.

I placed my hand on her back—the hand with the silver ring that was still glowing, somehow brighter now.

I kept my hand there and closed my eyes.

And in the space of five seconds I saw Dorothy's entire life—her childhood, her adolescence, her adult years—and I knew about her two cats at home, Mork and Mindy, I knew about her last boyfriend, a man to whom she'd been engaged, and how he'd beaten her almost every other day.

With my eyes closed, seeing all this, I also saw the growing pool of blood and slushie surrounding Dorothy's body. I saw the blood reverse course, going against gravity and its nature to spread out, the blood instead returning to her body, her body dislodging the bullets, first the one, then the other, and the skin closing back up, repairing itself.

I opened my eyes, looked down at the ring.

It was no longer glowing.

Dorothy groaned, mumbled something, and turned over. Staring up at me, she said, "What happened?"

"A man came in here with a gun and tried to rob the place."

"What?"

"It's okay. You slipped, knocked yourself unconscious, and the guy didn't know what to do, so he just bolted."

"He didn't see you?"

"I was still in the back. I was"—I swallowed, looked away—"scared."

Dorothy sat up, wincing at the pain in the back of her head. She looked down around her at reddish-brown pool of slushie and shook her head. "Well this is certainly a mess, isn't it?"

## 4

"Name?"

"I already told you."

"Name?"

"David Beveridge."

“Age?”

“I already told you that too.”

“Age?”

“Seventeen.”

Officer Titus, a large bulky black man with a shaved head, looked away from the pad he was writing on and glanced at his wristwatch.

“It’s eleven-fifteen,” he said. “Curfew for minors is eleven.”

At this point, my dad, who had been standing idly by wringing his hands, stepped forward.

“Okay, Officer, I think my son has answered all your questions. He was in the back when the assailant entered the store and he stayed there and didn’t see the man’s face. Now are we done here?”

My dad had arrived less than a minute after I called him. After all, we lived only ten blocks away and he had hurried here in his BMW in sweatpants and an undershirt.

The police—Officers Titus and Mallory—had pulled into the parking lot about a minute after Dorothy came to. I’d just helped her to her feet when the electronic buzzer went *ding-dong* and there the two cops stood staring at us with frowns.

Officer Titus took his time marking something down on his pad. He seemed bored, like he was too good for this type of cop work, probably believed he would someday make a great detective instead.

His partner, who had been inside taking Dorothy’s statement, came out the door and walked over to us shaking his head.

“Nothing on the tape.”

“Say that again?” Officer Titus asked.

“The tape was in the player and it was recording. Right before the perp came in, it all turned to static.” He noticed my dad, smiled, and extended his hand. “Assistant D.A. Beveridge, it’s very good to meet you, sir.”

Officer Titus gave my dad another look, something changing in his face. “Oh shit, I didn’t —”

“That’s quite okay,” my dad said. “So are we done here?”

“Just one more thing,” Officer Malloy said, stepping forward and taking my arm. In a soft voice he said, “David, what I’d like you to do now is glance across the street and see if you recognize any of those people as the guy.”

Officer Titus said, “The kid says he didn’t—”

“I know that,” Officer Mallory said. “But it’s a small store. He may not have seen the guy’s face completely, but he may have gotten a glimpse. Maybe even the color of his shirt or his hat. What do you say, David?”

We were right outside the store, the police cruiser next to us with its red and white roof lights flashing. It had drawn some attention across the street, a half dozen or so people milling around wondering what was what.

“Sure, okay,” I said and gave that side of the street a quick look—some Puerto Rican kids, two old black men, a tall bald guy with a thick goatee—and then I looked back at Officer Mallory and shook my head.

Officer Titus blew air through his nose but Mallory ignored it. He reached into his pocket, dug out a card, and handed it to me.

“If you can remember anything else, please feel free to call me, okay?”

My dad took the proffered card and slipped it into his pocket, smiling at me for the first time. “So are we done here?”

Officer Mallory nodded. “Yes, sir.”

## 5

My dad parked the BMW a block down from our brownstone. As he shut off the car, he said, “Where’d you get the ring?”

“The what?”

“On your finger. I don’t remember seeing it before.”

I glanced down at my left hand, lost for words, then said, “Just found it somewhere.”

We walked to the brownstone in silence, the block still but the city faint with noise. As we neared the house the streetlamps along the block flickered briefly.

“Strange,” my dad said. At the bottom of the stone steps he looked at me. “You sure you’re okay?”



“Yeah, I’m fine.”

He stepped forward, wrapped his arms around me, murmured, “I love you, son.”

I instantly felt that sudden pinprick on my finger and stepped out of his embrace. Staring up at him I studied his face, the furrows in his brow, the bags underneath his eyes.

Frowning at me, he said, “What is it?”

“You promised you would stop.”

“Huh?”

“You made a promise to Mom and me that you would never see her again.”

“David, what are you talking about?”

“You can’t even admit it, can you? You’re pathetic.”

The front door opened and my mom appeared in her wheelchair. “David? John? Is everything okay?”

I glanced back at my dad and saw him staring at me, his face suddenly tight.

“Yeah, honey,” he called. “Everything’s great.”

I turned away from him and hurried up the steps. Mom held out her arms, and I leaned down and gave her a hug.

“I was so worried,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“It sounds worse than it really was.”

My dad was still standing at the bottom of the steps, staring down the block.

I placed my hand on the door and waited for Mom to roll back so I could shut it.

“What about your father?”

“He said he needed to make a call before he comes in.”

I shut the door harder than I probably needed to, hoping he would somehow feel my anger through the vibrations.

“Easy now,” Mom said quietly. “You’ll wake your sister.”

But apparently my sister was already awake, little eight-year-old Emma dressed in her Hanna Montana pajamas rubbing the sleep from her eye as she stumbled out of the living room.

“David?” she asked sleepily. “Is that you?”

“Hey, munchkin. Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Mom said, “When your father received your call he was frantic and managed to wake her up. She’s been worried ever since.”

“Well I’m home now,” I said, smiling at my sister.

“You’re not hurt?”

“Not at all.”

“That’s good.”

“Want to take her upstairs and tuck her in for me?” Mom asked.

She was thinking about my dad and why he hadn’t come in yet. I knew this just as I knew Dad was still standing in the same spot I’d left him, his eyes now closed, wondering how I’d found out he was still sleeping around.

“Sure.” I leaned down, kissed my mom on the cheek. “Good night.”

I turned to my sister, grinned, and said, “I’ll race you to the top.” She was already turning away and scrambling up the stairs. I waited a few seconds and then hurried after, my mom laughing in that singsong way of hers as she watched us go.

“I win, I win, I win,” Emma cried when she reached the top, jumping up and down.

Of course she did; I always let her win.

## 6

After taking a long shower and brushing my teeth, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.

I thought about the silver ring.

About it glowing.

About Irving and how he’d shot Dorothy and me.

About how I’d seen darkness and then light.

About how I’d somehow healed Dorothy, brought her back to life, made her believe a different series of events.

About how I’d known my father was still cheating on my mom, even though he’d promised us he’d stop, that he was so very sorry and that he loved us so much and please please please would we forgive him?

I thought about what it all meant and what it could mean.

My mom, stricken with MS, forever confined to a wheelchair. She would never walk again.

Or would she?

I lifted my left hand up to my face so I could see the ring. Just enough light came in through the window that I could see it shine. I'd already tried pulling it off but it wouldn't budge. It was like the thing was stuck, glued to my skin, yet it didn't feel that way.

I'd touched Dorothy and brought her back to life.

My father had hugged me and I'd seen into his soul and the dark secret he was keeping.

I'd hugged and kissed my mother but her legs were still useless.

Why?

I didn't know, but I planned to find out.

And lying there, staring at the ring, I realized what I needed to do next.

## 7

In the morning I found Mom and Emma in the kitchen. Emma was at the table, playing a videogame, Mom rolling between the lowered counter and the refrigerator making breakfast.

"Where's dad?" I asked.

"Sleeping in." Mom cracked open an egg, dropped the yolk into a glass bowl. "Would you like an omelet?"

"Thanks, but I'm kind of in a hurry."

"It's eight-thirty. What pressing appointment could you possibly have?"

"Josh invited me over yesterday," I said, throwing one of my best friend's names out there to give the story more plausibility. I opened the cupboard, pulled out a box of S'Mores Pop-Tarts, and slid two of them into the toaster. "He wants me to help him set up his new computer."

"Oh honey," Mom said. "But after last night"—she threw a glance at my sister—"are you sure you want to leave by yourself?"

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Still ... "

I walked over to Emma. "Munchkin."

She didn't answer, intent on her videogame.

"Emma, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you were adopted."

Still no response, my sister biting her lip as her thumbs rapidly clicked the keypad.

I leaned down, kissed her on the head, then turned to the toaster as my Pop-Tarts popped up.

“Your father mentioned the police officers weren’t as friendly as they could have been,” Mom said as she whisked the eggs.

“He thinks everyone could be nicer than they are.”

“Still,” Mom said, concentrating on the task at hand, and I set the Pop-Tarts aside, walked over to her, took the glass bowl out of her hands, placed it on the counter, leaned down, and put my hands on her knees.

“I love you, Mom.”

I expected a sudden pinprick on my finger, for the ring to at least glow briefly, for my mom’s eyes to widen just a little as she felt her legs for the first time in years.

“I love you too, David,” she said, and it was clear nothing had happened, that her legs were still useless, and with my teeth clenched I stood straight up, turned, and left the kitchen.

“David?” my mom called. “What about your breakfast?”

But I kept walking, intent now on grabbing my bike and helmet, my stomach so empty I was starving but couldn’t eat a thing.

## 8

Officer Titus stood on the sidewalk just outside our brownstone.

“Hello there, David,” he said. “How are you?”

I navigated my bike down the steps, my helmet hanging off the handlebars and swinging back and forth. When I reached the bottom I stood there beside my bike, staring at the man who wasn’t wearing his uniform this morning but instead had on jeans and sneakers and a faded tee-shirt.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to apologize for last night.”

“You mean you aren’t always a jerk to seventeen-year-old victims involved in an armed robbery?”

“Technically,” Officer Titus said, “as nothing was stolen, it doesn’t officially count as robbery.”

He smiled, meaning it a joke, but I just stared back at him.

“Anyway, David, I just wanted to say sorry. I’ve been having some personal problems recently and brought it with me on the job, which I know I shouldn’t do, and—”

“If you’re trying to suck up to my dad, you’re talking to the wrong person,” I said, putting on my helmet and snapping the chinstrap together. I realized then I’d left my cell phone inside but didn’t want to risk going back in.

“Are you going for a ride?”

“No, I thought I’d just stand here with my bike and watch traffic go up and down the street.”

He made a face, looked down at his feet, and for the first time I felt sorry for him. I didn’t know why but I was being more of a smartass than usual. Maybe it had to do with his lack of professionalism last night, or maybe I was just cranky because I’d hardly slept.

“Look,” I said, swinging one leg over to straddle the bike, “I appreciate your stopping by like this and apologizing. No hard feelings, okay?”

He looked up, stared back at me, nodded slowly.

“See you around,” I said, because I couldn’t think of anything else to say, and I placed my foot on the pedal and pushed down and moved only an inch before Officer Titus spoke.

“By the way, David, that’s a nice ring you have there.” His voice was suddenly calm, measured, cold. “Where’d you get it?”

## 9

My grandmother’s nursing home was a large stone building located in the middle of downtown. In a way it was like the heart of the city, a dying heart, an irony that didn’t amuse many of its nearby residents.

I stood across the street next to the pole I’d just chained my bike and helmet to, staring at the glass entrance doors.

Through those doors were countless sick and dying people.

Through those doors were my grandmother and the Alzheimer’s that was slowly killing her.

Last night I’d brought a woman back from the dead.

This morning I’d wanted to heal my mother but couldn’t and now here I was.

Officer Titus's appearance had thrown me. His apology, and then his innocuous question. It was one thing for my father to notice the ring and ask about it but a completely different thing for a stranger.

Who knows, maybe the ring had been reported stolen and Officer Titus remembered seeing it on my hand last night. Maybe he was a much better cop than I took him for.

After he'd asked his question I'd looked down at the ring as if I didn't even remember it was there and shrugged and said it had been a present from my girlfriend, a promise ring to stay true to each other until we got married.

Officer Titus didn't need to know that my girlfriend and I broke up three months ago.

All he needed to know was that it was my ring, mine, and nobody else's.

I waited for traffic, then started out into the street, the entrance to the realm of the sick and dying growing closer with each step.

## 10

A sign in the lobby announced the nursing home's visiting hours:

Monday - Friday 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Saturday - Sunday 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Today was Saturday and it was barely nine o'clock. I knew the nursing home staff was strict regarding its visiting hours. Actually, in the two years my grandmother had been in this place, I had come to believe the staff was strict regarding just about everything.

The worst was a woman with the unfortunate name of Doris Hackman, who made Nurse Ratched look like Florence Nightingale. As luck had it, Nurse Hackman oversaw my grandmother's floor.

I went straight for the main desk and the man who was sitting behind it, reading this morning's paper. I was faintly aware of the sudden pinprick on my finger, and then I was standing in front of the desk waiting for the man to glance up and give me a bored look and tell me to come back in two hours.

He quietly turned the page.

I looked around, not sure what to make of this. I considered clearing my throat but instead noticed the bell on the counter and rang that instead.

The man jerked, looked up suddenly, stared at me with wide eyes.

Only, I realized an instant later, he was staring *through* me, because there was something in his eyes, something in the way they were focused that gave away the fact he wasn't seeing me at all.

I looked around again, and this time noticed the mirror hanging on the wall off to my left.

I could see the counter and the man and the pot of flowers and the events calendar. But that was it.

The man frowned, shook his head, and looked back down at his paper.

I stepped back, glanced down at the silver ring on my finger, the ring that was now glowing its strange glow.

Okay, so not only could I bring a woman back from the dead, but I could turn invisible.

I was fine with that.

Just as long as it worked for what else I needed it to do.

I hurried toward the elevators, pressed the up button, and waited until the doors slid open and Nurse Hackman walked out. She was a large woman, the kind for which they invented the word bulbous, and she had an ugly face, rounded shoulders, frizzy hair.

I didn't have time to step out of the way and she walked right through me, pausing only momentarily, glancing back with a frown before continuing on her way.

The doors started to slide shut and I jumped inside. I pressed the button for the third floor and waited until the doors opened again and I stepped out onto my grandmother's floor. All the florescent ceiling lights were on—every single one—yet the floor still managed to exude a dreary and desolate feeling.

I walked past a nurse helping an elderly man climb into his wheelchair. It made me think briefly of my mother and how I'd placed my hands on her legs but hadn't changed a thing.

As I walked I could smell the people around me, could smell the promise of death, and I wanted to stop at every room, touch every sick man and woman, and rid them of their diseases, reverse their biological clocks so they would begin to grow young.

And maybe I would do that, I told myself as I reached my grandmother's room. Maybe I would.

The silver ring was still glowing, keeping me invisible. I placed my palm on the handle, pushed it down, and slipped inside.

The moment my grandmother's door snapped shut again the ring stopped glowing. I glanced up at the mirror in her bathroom and I could see myself again.

I barely had time to relish the thought and experience of my invisibility before a groan sounded out in the dim room and I looked over at the woman in the bed.

She stirred, her small and frail head moving back and forth on the pillow. From where I stood she looked like a ghost, an emaciated and shriveled corpse.

"Grandma," I said.

She groaned again, opened her eyes, looked at me.

"John?" she whispered in a long, drawn out voice.

I went to her bed and pulled up a chair next to it and sat down.

"No, Grandma, it's David. I'm your grandson."

"John ... you look so ... different."

"Grandma," I said, and something cracked in my voice. It was the same thing that had been with me in the kitchen when I tried to heal my mom, the thing that understood I had failed then and that I would fail now.

"John," my grandmother said again in that dreamy way of hers, pushing down her bedcovers so she could reach out a hand to me.

I just stared at it—the wrinkled flesh, the brown nails—and I didn't move. I couldn't move. All I could do was sit there and smell the malodorous mixture of scents wafting from her dying body.

"John"—still holding her hand out to me—"what have you ... been doing lately?"

"I've started another affair."

"Oh," she said, and lost the strength to keep her hand balanced in the air. "Well, that's nice."

I tried remembering a time when she hadn't been like this. When she had been completely lucid and happy and would take me to the park and bring day-old bread so we could feed the ducks.

"John," she said again, and that thing inside of me keeping me frozen snapped.



I stood, leaned forward, and placed my hand—the hand with the silver ring—on her forehead.

I closed my eyes, picturing the ring in my mind, willing it to glow.

“John?” she asked now, and I shushed her, told her to be quiet, and with my eyes closed I just stood there with my hand against her forehead, praying that the ring would suck the Alzheimer’s out of her body.

I stood like that for thirty seconds, a minute, five minutes, however long it took before the door opened and an angry voice said, “What in God’s name is going on here?”

## 12

Doris Hackman stood in the doorway, one hand on the handle, the other quickly reaching out and flicking on the light switch. Our eyes met for just an instant and then she stepped back, shouted, “Celia, call security, now!” and before I knew it she was running at me.

She was much faster than she looked. In the matter of only seconds she had made it across the room, her teeth bared, her hands already reaching for me. It didn’t cross my mind until that instant what it had looked like from her point of view: me standing over my grandmother, my hand on her forehead, but with my back to the doorway, it could easily have appeared as if I was trying to suffocate her.

“No, listen, look,” I said, already stepping back.

Doris grabbed me, pulled me away from the bed, and right then I felt that familiar pinprick and saw everything about this woman’s life, just like I had with Dorothy, and I immediately said, “King’s death wasn’t your fault.”

The woman paused, her hands still squeezing me, her eyes now going wide.

Staring back into her ugly face, I said, “It was your mother who forgot to chain him up that day. Not you.”

Frantic footsteps headed toward us up the corridor.

“That’s how he made it out into the road. That’s how he got hit by that truck. It wasn’t your fault like your mom later told you. It was hers.”

Two orderlies appeared in the doorway at the same moment Doris loosened her grip on my arm. That physical connection was lost but as I stared back into her ugly face, into her eyes, I saw something else that hadn't happened yet but which she was planning.

"Want us to call the cops?" one of the orderlies asked.

"Don't you do it," I said to her. "He may be sick, he may have no family, but you don't have the right to let him die."

Her eyes widened again, her normally pale face suffused with blood.

"Nurse Hackman!" the other orderly said. They had both entered the room, were slowly approaching us. "Do you want us to call the police or not?"

She was staring back at me, shaking her head almost imperceptibly, whispering, "How can you ... how could you possibly ... "

"I know you want to help," I said. "But it's wrong, and you know it."

"John?" My grandmother's long, drawn out voice caused me to blink, to shake the possible images out of my mind: Doris Hackman standing over a dying man on this floor, feeling pity for him, considering the idea of accelerating his death. "What's ... happening?"

"Nurse Hackman," the same orderly said, reaching out and touching her arm.

Just like me she blinked, shook her head as if awaking from a dream, and then looked at the two orderlies. "No, don't bother with the police. Just escort him out of the building and make sure he never comes back."

The two orderlies looked at each other.

"You mean ban him for life?" one of them asked. "Because I don't think we can—"

"Just get him out of my sight," Doris Hackman said. "I never want to see his face again."

## 13

The orderlies were surprisingly gentle.

They led me down to the first floor and toward the entrance past the front desk where the man was still reading this morning's paper.

Neither of them spoke until we reached the doors, and one of them said, "How'd you get in here anyway?"

I looked at him, then at his friend, then turned and walked outside.

The morning traffic had picked up. The temperature had risen a couple of degrees. The sun was hot on my head.

I went to the edge of the sidewalk and closed my eyes and clenched my teeth and squeezed my fists and did everything I could not to scream out my frustrations.

After a moment I opened my eyes and looked across the street toward where I'd chained my bike.

A figure stood beside the pole, a short figure wearing a long blue robe and cowl. This figure didn't have a face, at least not one I could see. Where a face should have been was just darkness. Yet somehow I had the distinct impression the figure was watching me.

I took a step back, pivoted to my left, thinking I'd walk around the block and come back and hopefully that strange figure would be gone.

I went only a couple feet before I stopped again.

Another figure—wearing the same long blue robe, the same cowl, the same darkness where a face should have been—was at the end of the block.

I now pivoted one-hundred and eighty degrees, toward the other end of the block.

A third figure stood there too.

Looking around wildly—at the first figure, at the second and the third—I felt that familiar pinprick and glanced down at the ring glowing on my finger.

I didn't know what it meant, and when I glanced back up I saw the figures were approaching, all three of them, coming quickly, and without thinking I turned and sprinted back toward the nursing home's entrance.

The two orderlies were still in the lobby, talking to the man behind the counter. They saw me, started to stand up straight, started to speak.

I ran past them down the corridor.

Now they yelled, telling me to stop, but I barely heard them. Instead I somehow heard the three figures as they gave chase, now in front of the nursing home, now inside, moving in a strange fluid motion as if propelled by something other than their feet.

At the end of the corridor were double doors. I went through them, continued through the back of a kitchen, past the dishwashers, past two women talking with their arms crossed, and then I came to one of the back doors leading into the alleyway behind the building and I crashed through that and kept running.

I paused, looked left, looked right, then started running again, knowing the three figures had somehow overtaken the orderlies, the now confused orderlies, maybe finally calling the police. Any moment now those figures would come out through the same exit door and see me and—

I reached the end of a block just as the man stepped out from around the corner, a shotgun in his hands, aimed right at my face.

## 14

“Down!” the man shouted, and I dropped to the ground, pushed my face against the macadam, right as the shotgun roared.

My eyes closed, I somehow saw the three figures now out in the alleyway, the one in front being struck down.

The man stepped over me, racked the shotgun, pulled the trigger. The shotgun roared and took the second figure down, then the man did the same thing again—racked the gun, pulled the trigger—and one final *BANG!* echoed in the alleyway and the third figure lay flat on the ground.

For a moment there was silence.

Then the man growled, “Come on, get up,” and when I didn’t move, when I didn’t even open my eyes, he grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled me to my feet.

“Let’s go!” he shouted, pushing me forward.

My feet moved of their own volition, taking me to the end of the alleyway where they stopped, not sure where to take me next.

The man grabbed my arm, tugged me toward an old red Ford pickup.

“Hurry, get in.”

I said, “But what—” and glanced back down the alleyway ... where the first figure was now sitting up, followed by the second figure, then the third.

“Goddamn it,” the man shouted, slamming the driver’s door shut, starting the engine, “get in the truck now!”

I sprinted to the passenger door, opened it, jumped inside just as the man slammed his foot down on the gas.

The truck jerked forward. It passed the mouth of the alleyway and I glanced over to see the three figures coming toward us and the man said, “Watch your head,” and pushed me down just

as the rear windshield shattered and I cried out and he pushed the gas even harder bringing us to the end of the alley and then slammed on the brakes just as he jerked the wheel taking us out onto the main street.

I was hunched in the passenger seat, my eyes closed, my hands on my head. Seconds passed before I realized I was still alive.

“What—what—what was that?”

“Trouble,” the man said, keeping his eyes on the street as he swerved us in and out of traffic.

“But you shot them.”

“That I did.”

“And they—they got back up.”

“You noticed that, did you?”

“And then they ... they shot at us?”

“Hey, nothing gets past you.”

At the upcoming intersection the light turned yellow and the man punched the gas, accelerating us through just in time.

I said, “Who are they?”

“You know exactly who they are.”

“I do?”

The man looked at me for the first time, nodding.

“But I ... I don’t. I have no idea.”

“Let’s just say they’re not from around here.”

“What does that mean?”

“Come on, you can do it. Just say it. It’ll make this whole thing a hell of a lot easier.”

“They were ... ” I paused, swallowing. “Aliens?”

“Bingo,” the man said.

I glanced out my window, watched the buildings and cars and people streak past.

“Why were they chasing me?”

“You mean that isn’t obvious by now?”

When I looked back at the man he glanced at the ring on my finger.

“Is it theirs?”

The man laughed. “Kid, nobody owns the ring.”

“Then why were they chasing me?”

“Because that’s what bad guys do.”

The man had begun to slow, probably thinking we were now safe. The traffic light ahead turned red and he stopped and turned slightly in his seat.

“The name’s Cashman,” he said, extending his hand. “Alien bounty hunter extraordinaire. Nice to meet you.”

## 15

Cashman pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his jacket, stuck one in his mouth, went to put the pack away then held it out to me.

“Want one?”

When I didn’t answer he put the pack away, pulled out a lighter, lit the cigarette, took a long drag, then looked at me as he blew smoke out of the side of his mouth.

“See, I might not know everything, but I do know my etiquette. When I hold out my hand, tell you my name, you’re supposed to shake my hand and tell me your name. What—you never learned that?”

I was staring out my window. In a soft voice, I said, “This isn’t happening.”

“Say that again?”

“This whole thing,” I said, looking back at him. “This isn’t real.”

“Is that right? So that thing there on your finger, it hasn’t done weird stuff now, has it? Nothing that would seem—oh, I don’t know—unbelievable?”

I squinted at him, this tall large bald man with a thick goatee. He had large gold earrings in each ear.

“I’ve seen you before,” I said.

“Have you now?”

“Last night. You were across the street from the convenience store. Have you ... have you been *following* me?”

“Not you. That.” Cashman using his cigarette to point toward my hand. “See, there’s a kind of ... power the thing gives off. You might not be able to sense it. Hell, not many people could. But someone like me, someone who—”

“Hunts aliens?”

He grinned. “Why, yeah, exactly. People like me, our minds have sort of become attuned to the world outside our own. And when I sensed this thing here last night and I tracked it down, I knew trouble would be coming for it as soon as possible.”

We were leaving downtown now, headed toward the expressway.

“Where are we going?”

“Gotta lay low for a while. At least until I can come up with a solid game plan.”

“But won’t they find us?”

“Give them enough time they will.”

I stared back out my window, thinking about the past half hour. “Stop the truck.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to get out. I want to go home.”

“Kid, you go home, those things will follow you. Bad shit will happen, if you get my drift.”

The shotgun was between us on the bucket seat. I could still smell the gunpowder.

I grabbed it, held it up so it was aimed at Cashman’s face. “Stop the fucking truck.”

The cigarette still between his lips, he glanced in his rearview mirror, then slowed and pulled us over to the side of the highway. Slowly putting the truck in park, he said, “Now what, boss?”

I moved back against the door, kept the shotgun aimed with my left hand as I reached down and opened the door with my right.

“Now I’m leaving.”

“Oh yeah? And where are you going? We’re on the highway. The next exit isn’t for a mile and a half. You going to walk the entire way with that shotgun? Don’t you think that might make some people a little skittish?”

The door now open, I placed my right foot flat against the pavement.

“And then what are you going to do once you make it off the highway?” Cashman asked. He kept his hands on the steering wheel; the cigarette still dangled from his lips. “Last time those

things came after you, you ran like a little girl. In fact, if I remember correctly—and I should, as it happened only ten minutes ago—it was me who saved your ass back there.”

“What are you saying?”

For the first time Cashman moved his head so he could look at me. “I’m saying stop being stupid. You don’t know what’s going on. I do. So why would you leave? At least stay with me until you find out what this is all about.”

“And what is this all about?”

“Goddamn it, kid, we don’t have time for that right now. In case you forgot, you’ve got a shotgun aimed at my head and we’re on the highway and God knows how many people can see us. So why don’t you put the shotgun down, shut the door, and we’ll get moving again.”

“Where are you going to take me?”

“Someplace safe.”

“And how do I know you’re not going to try to kill me once we get there?”

Here Cashman grinned, had to hold back a laugh. “You’ve been wearing that ring long enough to know by now I can’t do shit to you even if I wanted to. With that thing on you, you’re practically invincible.”

I thought for a moment, then said, “So then I shouldn’t be afraid of those things back there.”

“Look, are we going to play word games all day, or are we going to get moving?”

I thought for another moment, then shut the door and said, “Fine. But I’m keeping this thing aimed at you while you drive.”

Shaking his head, placing the truck back in gear, Cashman said, “Whatever makes you happy, kid.”

## 16

Just before we crossed over the river, Cashman took the exit for the warehouse district.

Keeping the shotgun leveled on him, I glanced out my window. I’d driven past this section of the city thousands of times, but that had been with my parents in their car as they cruised by on the expressway. Never had I actually come here. Nobody in their right mind would.



Many of the warehouses were abandoned, something I remembered my dad mentioning had to do with city legislation and red tape. Trash littered the streets. Graffiti marked almost every building. Boards covered almost every other window.

Cashman pulled up in front of a white stone building, placed the truck in park, and cut the engine.

“What is this place?”

“A speakeasy,” he said, already opening his door and stepping out. He turned, squinted back at me. “You coming or what?”

“It’s not even noontime. I didn’t think bars were open this early.”

“First, this isn’t a bar. Second, you’re a kid. What the hell do you know about bars anyway?”

I glanced back out my window. The street was deserted. I got out of the truck, keeping the shotgun aimed at Cashman.

He gave me a bored look, then started walking. We went around to the back of the building, to a narrow alleyway. He knocked on a door, waited, knocked again.

Eventually a voice said, “What’s the password?”

“Open up, I need to take a piss.”

There came the sound of the deadbolt clicking over, then the door opened. An older woman peered out of us.

“That’s not the goddamn password and you know it,” she said.

Cashman pushed his way past her. “Don’t mind the kid with the shotgun. He’s with me.”

She frowned at me, didn’t even glance at the weapon in my hands. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s Saturday,” I said, stepping into the building. It was dark and cool and smelled like a kitchen. Which I guess made sense, because it was a kitchen.

Cashman opened a refrigerator, pulled out a beer. “Want one?” he asked me.

I shook my head.

The woman closed the door, turned the deadbolt, then said, “Can you please explain to me what’s going on here?”

“Haven’t you noticed?” Cashman took a gulp of the beer, wiped his mouth, and pointed the bottle at me. “He’s wearing the ring.”

The woman gasped. Her hands to her face, she said, “Oh my God, you really do have it on you, don’t you.”

I stood there silent, the shotgun now lowered toward the floor. “Okay, now that we’re here, tell me what’s going on.”

Cashman took another gulp of beer, watching me. He shook his head. “Not until you put that thing down. You’re making me nervous.”

“No.”

“Kid, do we really have to go through this? I’m not going to hurt you. Besides, wasn’t it me who saved your ass back there? And anyway, like I said, with that ring on your finger you’re practically invincible.”

The woman was standing very close to me now, her eyes wide as she tried to get a good look at the silver ring.

I gave it a moment, then said, “Fine. But I want you to tell me everything.”

Cashman shrugged, nodded, and held out his hand for the weapon.

I took the shotgun and racked it once, ejecting a round, then kept racking it until no more rounds came out. Four of them lay at my feet. I handed him the shotgun.

“Invincible, yes,” Cashman said, taking the shotgun with a smile. “Smart, no.”

And with the butt of the shotgun he knocked me on the side of the head.

Cue darkness.

## 17

“I told you this was a waste of time.”

“Shut up.”

“If anybody knew this would be a waste of time, it’d be you.”

“I said shut your goddamn mouth.”

“All you’re doing now is making a mess.”

“Do you want me to kill you? Because you know I will. I’d do it happily.”

I opened my eyes. Stared up at Cashman crouching over me.

He had a sledgehammer in his hands and was glaring at the old woman standing beside him.

She noticed me first. “Oh dear, look who’s awake.”

Cashman turned his attention back to me. He had a bored, irritated expression on his face. “Welcome back to the land of the living, David.”

I was in a supine position on a cold cement floor. The walls, I noticed as my eyes adjusted, were gray cinderblocks. I tried sitting up but found I couldn’t. My legs were chained to the floor, as was my left hand. It was stretched out beside me on the floor. All around it were bits and pieces of metal and wood.

“How do you know my name?”

Cashman hefted the sledgehammer as he stood up straight. He glanced at the woman and said, “This is going to be harder now that he’s conscious.”

“Do you want to knock him unconscious again?”

He shrugged. “I’m kinda interested to see what happens now that he’s awake.”

“Hey,” I shouted. “Why are you doing this?”

“There is no why, David. All there is is that ring on your finger, and I want to get my hands on it. Except, see, the thing won’t come off. But you already knew that, didn’t you? Yes, I can tell by the look on your face. You’ve tried taking it off but it wouldn’t come. See, it was the same for us, so what did we do? We tried cutting off your finger.”

Cashman stepped back, grabbed a butcher knife off a table, held it up for me to see the damaged blade.

“But the thing is, once the steel touches your skin, it becomes like butter. Like I told, you’re practically invincible. So for the past three hours we’ve been trying to first cut your finger off, then cut your hand off, but, well, we’re not having much luck.”

“But why—”

Cashman stepped forward, raised the sledgehammer up over his head, and brought it down with a grunt.

The steel tip raced toward my left hand spread out on the floor. I didn’t even have a chance to move it a centimeter before the hammer made contact.

For an instant the silver ring flashed and the hammer burst apart, exploding into a thousand pieces.

“Goddamn it!” Cashman shouted. He turned and threw what was left of the sledgehammer across the room. It sailed end over end until it bounced off the cinderblock wall, hit the floor, and went still.

I stared at my hand, at the ring that was no longer glowing. The hammer had in fact made contact—I’d felt its cold tip kiss the skin—but I hadn’t felt any pain. I hadn’t felt anything.

“See?” the old woman said. “Are you ready to give up yet?”

Cashman glared down at me, his teeth gritted. “Not yet. Bring me the chainsaw.”

## 18

Darkness again.

And in the darkness I saw my family, my parents and sister. In the darkness I saw them dead. Yet they were still alive. Their eyes wide, their faces pale. Screaming.

Something touched my face.

I jerked out of sleep.

The old woman was crouched in front of me, pressing a damp cloth against my forehead.

“Are you thirsty?”

I nodded.

She stood up, turned toward the wooden table, picked up a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap, then held it out to me.

I just stared at her.

“Go ahead,” she prompted.

I remembered then that my right hand wasn’t chained to anything and reached out and took the water and chugged it until there was nothing left.

The woman took the empty bottle back from me with a small smile. “You really were thirsty, weren’t you?”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Son, I’m not doing anything to you.”

“My parents are going to realize I’m missing. They’ll call the police.”

She produced that small smile again, only this time it was tinged with sadness. Shaking her head, she whispered, “You poor, poor boy.”

I couldn't tell whether she was being sincere or sarcastic and looked away from her. Beside me on the floor were the remains of the chainsaw Cashman had used earlier.

"Are you scared?"

I looked back at her.

"Stupid question, I know." The woman ducked her head, raised it back up. "My name's Nancy by the way. I'd say it's nice to meet you, but ... "

"Why. Are. You. Doing. This."

"Again, I'm not doing anything. It's Cashman. He wants the ring."

"Yeah, I kind of already figured that part out."

She looked away from me, bit her lip, closed her eyes. She stayed that way for a long moment. "To be honest with you," she said but then went silent.

"What?"

She shook her head.

"What were you going to say?"

She started to speak again, stopped, took a deep breath and whispered, "To be honest with you, I'm scared too."

"Of what?"

"The Shadow Man."

"Who?"

"He's coming, you know. Cashman already contacted him. He'll be here tonight. He wants the ring."

"And what is he going to do once he gets it?"

Nancy shook her head, looked away from me again.

"Hey," I said softly.

She looked back.

"You don't have to do this. You can let me go."

She stared down at me, just stared for the longest time. She seemed to be thinking of something and looked as if she was about to speak when the door at the top of the stairs opened and Cashman came down the steps. He had two large paper bags in his arms and was grinning.

"Had to make a quick stop at the hardware store," he said. "Ready for round two?"

“This just doesn’t make sense.” Cashman took a long drag on his cigarette, then puffed out three small smoke rings. “I mean, why you? What makes you so fucking special?”

I was still chained to the floor, staring up at the ceiling. Cashman had brought back another chainsaw and a flame torch. Both had failed, so he’d stepped on my arm to keep it in place and emptied an entire clip of his gun into my hand. Still nothing.

“You’re just a fucking kid. Not even eighteen years old. Why would the ring choose you?”

I blinked, turned my head to look at him. “Choose me?”

“What—you think it was just by accident you came across the ring and decided to put it on?” Cashman dropped the cigarette, ground it out with his boot. “Nah, it don’t work like that.”

“What is the ring anyway?”

“Too complicated to explain.”

“Who is the Shadow Man?”

He seemed to freeze in place. “What?”

“The Shadow Man. Why does he want the ring?”

“How the hell—” He scrunched his face up suddenly, turned and kicked the wall.

“Goddamn it! She sure does have a big mouth, doesn’t she?”

“Answer my question.”

“Fuck you, David.”

“What were those things earlier, the ones you *saved* me from?”

“Goddamn it!” he shouted again, this time kicking a broken piece of the chainsaw. It didn’t go very far, spinning across the concrete floor, and it looked like Cashman had hurt his foot in the process. “I’m gonna kill her. I’m gonna fucking kill her.”

He limped across the room, disappeared up the steps, slammed the door shut.

A moment later the lights went off, drenching me in darkness.

I closed my eyes, stared into my own special darkness.

Time passed—a couple minutes, maybe an hour—and then the lights came back on. I could hear the bulbs buzzing in the ceiling.

I opened my eyes just as the door opened and footsteps came down the stairs.

I expected Cashman but it was Nancy.

She came to me, shaking her head quickly. “Why did I ever say anything to you? Why?”  
Again I tried sitting up but the chains stopped me.

“Me and my stupid mouth.” She stuffed her hand into her pocket, brought back out a small ring of keys. “One of these days I’ll learn. One of these days ... ”

She sorted through the keys until she found the one she wanted. Then she reached down, inserted it into the lock keeping my feet chained, turned the key. The lock popped open.

“What ... what are you doing?”

“Freeing you,” she said, inserting the key into the lock keeping my left hand chained.  
“What does it look like?”

“But won’t Cashman ... won’t he be angry?”

The lock popped open and she laughed.

“More than he already is? I doubt it. He’ll probably kill me for doing this, but I can’t let this go on. Not with the Shadow Man coming. That ... that would be too awful.”

My legs and hand now free to move, they did nothing and acted like they were still chained.

“Come on now,” Nancy said, standing up straight and stuffing the keys back into her pocket. “Get up.”

I just stared back at her.

She sighed, stepped forward, leaned down so her face was only inches away from mine. For a moment nothing happened. Then her eyes rolled back in her head and her face changed—the skin looking like it was turning inside out, her white hair turning black as it grew shorter—and an instant later it was not Nancy that was staring back at me but myself.

“Get up, David,” this other me said.

My legs and hand found purpose again and I scrambled to my feet. I pushed myself against the cold cinderblock wall and just stared back at my sudden doppelganger.

“Run!” the thing shouted.

I ran.

## 20

Up the stairs, through the door, I came out into the kitchen and headed for the back door which we’d used to enter this place when something caught my eye and I stopped.

The shotgun that I'd leveled on Cashman while we were driving, the thing I had given him and which he had used to knock me unconscious, lay on one of the prep tables. The ejected shells were conveniently lined up beside it.

I hurried over and inspected the shotgun. It had been easy ejecting the shells; loading them would be another story.

Fooling with it, I kept glancing at the basement door, expecting Nancy or what had become of Nancy to make an appearance.

My hands were shaking. Blood pounded in my ears.

Finally I managed to insert one of the shells, lock it into place, then added three more.

Before I left I glanced back, expecting the door to open, expecting for some reason my parents do be there staring back at me, dead.

A second passed and nothing happened.

I went outside.

The day had worn on, the sun almost gone from the sky. I glanced at my wrist instinctively but I wasn't wearing a watch.

The shotgun in my hands, I made my way down the alleyway toward the main street. I could see a few cars already passing by. Heavy bass thumped from one of them.

I came around the building to find the parking lot deserted. Maybe this was a speakeasy and maybe it wasn't. Whatever the case, at least Cashman's truck wasn't here.

I stepped out on the street, looking back and forth for any traffic. That heavy bass had faded and now there was that constant and palpable silence that inhabits most cities.

Right then an engine growled down the street. Headlights appeared.

I started walking in that direction, trying to keep the shotgun concealed behind my back. The last thing I wanted to do now was spook a potential Good Samaritan and wished I'd left the weapon back inside.

With my free hand—my right hand, the one without the silver ring—I waved to the oncoming vehicle.

I stood there for maybe five seconds, waving frantically, until the shape of the vehicle became distinct.

An old red Ford pickup truck.

Cashman's pickup truck.



Without thinking I brought the shotgun around and aimed it at the oncoming headlights, the engine now a ferocious roar, and fired.

The shotgun exploded and the windshield splintered but the truck didn't slow.

It was coming for me, swerving right in my direction—fifty feet away, forty feet—and though the silver ring made me invincible I wasn't going to take the chance.

I dove out of the way at the last second.

Hitting the ground hard, rolling, jumping back to my feet, I turned just as Cashman slammed on the brakes and spun the truck around to face me again.

We were less than fifty feet apart now.

Cashman was hunched over the wheel, glaring back at me. He kept revving the engine.

I lifted the shotgun, ejected the spent shell, and aimed it straight back at him.

A moment passed.

Another moment.

Then Cashman placed the truck back into gear and the tires squealed and it was racing toward me, coming closer, closer, closer, and I waited another second and then pulled the trigger, ejected the spent shell, pulled the trigger, ejected the spent shell, pulled the trigger, all in one fluid motion, like I was a natural, and I stepped out of the way just as the truck moved past me, the windshield completely shattered, glass raining down everywhere, Cashman slumped dead over the wheel.

The truck kept going though; Cashman must have still had his foot on the gas. It slowed speed but kept going, across the street, up over the curb, and then—bang—went right into the side of another abandoned warehouse.

I stood still for a couple seconds, breathing hard. I looked down at the shotgun in my hands, tried to remember how many shells I'd put into it. But I knew it didn't matter. Cashman was dead.

Still, as I approached the pickup, I did so slowly, keeping the shotgun aimed even though I was now certain it would do me no good if I truly needed it.

Even though it had crashed into the side of the building, Cashman still had his foot on the gas, making the engine growl.

Stepping closer, raising the shotgun, I moved into a position where I would come up right beside the driver's window.

There was no movement inside. He was definitely dead.

Keeping the shotgun aimed, I opened the door, reached in, and pulled Cashman out. His body flopped down on the ground with a dry thud. His foot no longer on the gas, the truck's engine quit its whining and went suddenly silent.

I stared down at him, this man who had done everything he could to get his hands on the silver ring.

He was dead and I felt no remorse and I wondered briefly what that said about me, whether I could still be considered a good person.

I stepped over him, climbed up into the truck, slammed the door shut. The engine had shut off so I had to turn it again and again until it finally caught. Then I backed out, glanced one last time at Cashman, and punched the gas.

## 21

I had just gotten off the expressway and was headed downtown back toward home when the police officer pulled me over.

There was a brilliant flash in the rearview mirror, followed by a whooping siren, and then the rapidly spinning red and white lights.

I considered my options. Trying to outrun the cop was the first thing that came to mind. But then I remembered I had done nothing wrong. If anything, a cop was exactly what I needed right now.

Besides, the traffic light at the upcoming intersection was turning red so I had no choice but to stop anyway.

It was as I pulled the truck over to the curb—the truck that was completely beat to hell, no wonder the cop was pulling me over—that I remembered the shotgun on the passenger seat.

I looked at it quickly, opened my mouth, and muttered, “Oh shit.”

*“Shut off the engine and slowly step out of the vehicle.”* Apparently the officer wasn't taking any chances after seeing the condition of the truck. *“Keep your hands where I can see them.”*

I considered my options again. Understood very quickly that I had only one.

I shut the truck off, opened my door, and with my hands raised stepped out onto the pavement.

“Now place your hands on the hood and do not move.”

I stepped to the front of the truck, noticing that the hood was quite mangled. I guess in my haste I hadn’t realized just what kind of target it was going to make me.

But this was okay, I thought as I placed my hands on the warm metal. The cop would come and I would tell my story and he would get me into protection.

Except my story would be a problem. You know, what with all the aliens and shape shifters and everything.

The cop had stepped out of his car, was now slowly approaching me. The radio on his belt squawked.

Not moving from my position, I said, “What seems to be the problem, officer?”

The cop didn’t answer. He kept walking, and from the corner of my eye I could see he had his hand on the holster of his gun. When he came within just a few feet, looked inside and saw the shotgun, the beads of shattered glass, he cursed and quickly drew the gun.

“Get down on the ground.”

“What?”

“Down on the ground!” he shouted. “Do it now!”

I pushed away from the truck, keeping my hands raised as I turned toward him. “Officer, please, you have to—”

“Get down on the motherfucking ground, asshole.”

I wondered briefly how long he’d waited to say that phrase.

“Okay, okay,” I said, and started to lower myself to the pavement, first one knee, then the other. “But please, will you just listen to me?”

The cop wouldn’t. While he kept his weapon aimed at me, he turned his head to speak into the mike Velcroed to his uniform, and that was when I felt the sudden pinprick on my finger.

I looked at the ring that was now glowing, looked back up at the officer who was speaking into his radio but suddenly stopped when he turned his attention back to me.

I was invisible again. I knew it by the way the cop’s eyes widened, by the way his body suddenly tensed. And he wasn’t looking at me like he had before with those cold, hard trained eyes; now he was looking through me.

The radio squawked again, the dispatcher asking the cop to repeat what he'd just said. The cop stood there, his eyes still wide, his mouth now opened. I got back to my feet, watching the cop carefully. He didn't notice a thing. How much longer the ring would keep me invisible, I didn't know. All I knew was that right now I was less than two miles away from home. Turning my back on the speechless cop, his radio still squawking, I started running.

## 22

At some point between where the cop had pulled me over and my house, the silver ring had stopped glowing and I became visible again.

I barely noticed.

I just kept running as hard and as fast as I could and didn't even slow when I reached our block or when I reached the steps to our brownstone.

What slowed me was the front door. It was locked—something I should have assumed—and I had to ring the bell repeatedly until my dad opened it.

"David?" he said incredulously. "Where—where have you been?"

I pushed past him into the house, hurried over to the table just beside the door where he kept his wallet and keys and breath mints and other junk he'd acquired over a typical business day.

"Where is it?" I said, sorting through the loose dollar bills and change and plastic-wrapped toothpicks.

My dad shut the door. "Where is what?"

Before I could respond my mom rolled into the hallway. She actually gasped when she saw me, placing a hand on her chest.

"Honey, what happened to you? Where have you been?"

Upstairs I heard my sister shouting, "David? Is David home?"

I ignored both of them and turned back to my dad. "The cop from last night, Officer Mallory, he gave you his card. Where is it?"

"I think I have it in my study. Why?"

I was already turning, hurrying around my mom, through the kitchen and into my father's study. Surrounded by bookcases, his desk stood in the middle like an island. I went to it and started rifling through the papers on top until I found the cop's card.

Dad stepped into the room. "David, what is the meaning of this? Where have you been?"

I picked up the phone on his desk and dialed the number on the card and then listened as the phone rang, hoping that I wasn't making a mistake by calling Mallory. He'd shown patience and intelligence last night and he knew about what had happened—or at least some of what had happened—and right now I felt calling him was a better chance than trying to get through to someone at 911, someone who would transfer me to someone else who would then transfer me to someone else ...

"Hi, this is Frank Mallory," the voice mail prompt began, and I closed my eyes and listened to the rest as my mom and Emma both entered the study.

Then there was the beep and I started talking.

"Officer Mallory, this is David Beveridge, from last night. I need you to call me back as soon as possible. Please, it's important."

I left the house number and hung up the phone and then just stood there for a long time, staring down at the cluttered papers on Dad's desk.

"Honey?" Mom said.

I looked up.

She glanced at my dad, cleared her throat, and in a cautious voice said, "Did you visit grandma this morning?"

Right then the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Dad said, already turning to leave the study, but he wasn't fast enough.

I flew around the desk, past my parents and sister, through the kitchen, back into the main hallway to the front door.

Holding my breath, I peeked out the window. Then exhaling, I turned the lock and opened the door.

Officer Titus stood on the other side. Wearing street clothes like he had this morning, he wasn't the first cop I wanted to see, but he certainly wasn't the last.

"Hi, David," he said, smiling brightly this time, "I was in the neighborhood and wanted to stop by again to—"

I reached out and grabbed his arm and yanked him into the house. Slamming the door shut, I said, “Thank God you’re here.”

Dad was standing in the kitchen doorway now, completely perplexed. “David, what the hell is going on?”

I looked at him and Officer Titus and shook my head. For the first time the miles I’d run caught up with me and I leaned forward, gripping onto my knees, and took a deep breath.

“You’re not going to believe me even when I tell you.”

Dad said, “What is that supposed to mean?”

The phone rang. Mom answered the extension in the kitchen. She said a few words, then called out my name.

“It’s for you.”

I looked at Dad and Officer Titus again, wanting to tell them everything but realizing just how difficult that was going to be. I hurried into the kitchen, took the phone from my wary-looking mother, and placed the handset to my ear.

“Hello?”

“David, this is Frank Mallory calling you back.”

“Oh, it’s okay now.”

“What’s okay now?”

“Officer Titus is here.”

There was a silence.

Then: “What the fuck are you talking about?”

The tone was one I never thought Frank Mallory could produce.

“Look,” I said, turning and finding that everyone was in the kitchen now—my parents, Emma, Officer Titus—“I’m sorry to have bothered you or whatever, but I needed help and that’s why I called you. But now Officer Titus is here and he’ll take care of the situation.”

“Kid”—Mallory’s voice completely toneless now—“I don’t know what your game is, but that’s impossible. James Titus was found dead this morning. He was murdered.”

Mallory disconnected the call—had he been on a landline, he no doubt would have slammed it—and I slowly glanced back up to see my parents and sister and Officer Titus.

Only the man standing beside my father wasn't Officer Titus.

It said, "Uh-oh," and then its eyes rolled back in its head, its skin began to change color, hair began to grow on its chin, and seconds later Cashman was grinning back at me. "Surprised?"

Dad, having witnessed the transformation, said, "What the—"

Cashman pulled out a gun, aimed it my dad's head, and pulled the trigger.

Both my mom and sister screamed at the same moment, their shrill cries almost drowning out the gunshot.

As Dad fell to the ground, blood gushing everywhere, Cashman said to me, "That was for fucking up my truck."

He shifted his arm so the gun was now aimed at my mom, pulled the trigger again.

"And that was just for fun."

The phone was still in my hand, now doing its monotonic beeping. It was on a cord but it was a long cord and I threw it right at Cashman's head, shouting, "Emma, run!"

The cord wasn't long enough and Cashman should have known but he still flinched, moving the gun and firing but the aim was wide, taking out a cabinet door, and Emma managed to sprint past him.

A vase of roses was on the kitchen table, something that hadn't been there earlier this morning and which I was certain my dad had purchased out of guilt. I picked it up, chucked it at Cashman, just as he fired at me.

In the confusion I don't know if I felt the familiar pinprick or if the ring was now glowing; I just ran forward, right into him, knocking him down. Out into the hallway where Emma was trying to unlock the door but having trouble keeping her hands steady, tears falling down her face, her chest heaving.

"Emma, hurry!"

She immediately turned and sprinted up the stairs.

I glanced back in time to see Cashman getting to his feet, trying to take aim, and I started climbing the stairs too.

When she reached the top Emma kept running, went straight for her room, slammed the door shut. She even locked it and I had to bang on it, shout for her to let me in. Cashman fired

below, three consecutive gunshots. I didn't know what he hit. But I could hear him, his heavy feet on the steps hurrying toward us.

"Emma, please!"

Cashman, his feet pounding the stairs, almost to the top.

"Open up!"

I glanced back and saw the top of his bald head, then his eyes, then his grinning mouth, and then his gun as he raised it.

Turning back, I banged on the door once more, and this time I became aware of the sudden pinprick and the next thing I knew I was taking a step forward through the door just as a bullet pierced the spot right where my head had been.

## 24

Emma was cowered in the corner of her room, strangling one of her stuffed animals against her chest. She was sobbing, and when she saw me she screamed.

I hurried to her, lowering myself to my knees, taking her into an embrace.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay."

Out in the hallway Cashman shouted, then started banging on the door. With each bang Emma screamed again and again.

"Shh, listen to me." I held her tight, whispered into her ear. "We're going to get out of this, okay? Everything will be fine."

Even now I don't know why I lied to her like that. I guess it was just my job as an older brother to tell her what she needed to hear.

Cashman, having come to the conclusion he wasn't going to kick the door down, began shooting at the lock.

Emma screamed and screamed.

"Listen to me," I said, holding her tight. "We're trapped in here. We need to get out."

"No, no, no," she whimpered, her face pressed against my chest. "Mommy and daddy, they're ..."

But she couldn't say the word, as if by voicing the word it would mean they were actually dead.



Cashman kept firing at the lock. This side of the door was starting to splinter.

I shook my sister hard, growled into her face, “Shut up and listen to me, okay?”

For a moment she went silent, staring back at me with wide eyes.

“I’m going to open that door. And when I do, I want you to run. I want you to go to the front door, unlock it, and run as fast as you can. Go to the Sunoco station three blocks down. You know the one I mean?”

She just stared back at me, unblinking. It might be easier to have her run to a neighbor’s, but there was no guarantee anybody would answer, and if they did, there was no guarantee they would answer in time.

“Emma, you have to do this,” I said, shaking her again, and whatever it was keeping that needle skipping in place on the record of her mind finally caught and the music began to play again.

She nodded.

I quickly stood and turned and walked toward the door, the door that Cashman had stopped shooting and was now kicking again. The wood was splintered and was about to give any second.

I strode up to it and gripped the broken knob, hoping it would still turn. It did and I opened the door.

Cashman was in the process of lifting his foot for another kick. He paused, glaring at me, and right then I felt what I’d been expecting—that familiar pinprick—and rushed him, wrapping my arms around his body and shoving him into the wall.

“Emma, go!”

Behind me I could hear her feet pattering across the floor, past us, and down the steps.

The silver ring was still glowing, making me invincible, but it wasn’t giving me superhuman strength. Cashman was able to push me off without trouble. He’d dropped his gun when I rushed him and now he grabbed it, rose to his feet, hurried toward the top of the stairs.

“No!” I shouted, jumping to my feet, running, and as Cashman took aim at my sister sprinting down the steps, I threw my entire weight into this rush and lifted off the ground, flying through the air, closing my eyes.

I hit him right as he pulled the trigger, his aim went wide again, and with my momentum I sent him stumbling toward the banister, the banister that wasn't strong to begin with. It cracked, and he turned, began to raise his gun at me.

I rushed him one last time.

Giving it all I had now, my teeth clenched, I barreled into him.

The banister gave and we both fell over. We were weightless for only a second, nothing more, and then we hit the ground hard, Cashman on his back, me on top. Only I didn't feel any pain, not with the silver ring still glowing.

I was only faintly aware that Emma had managed to unlock the front door, open it, and escape.

Below me, Cashman groaned, mumbled a curse, and I stood up, prepared to run for the open door.

I took only two steps when I stopped.

My sister had appeared in the doorway again, her face now pale.

"Emma?" I said, but it was needless. A moment later I saw the reason why.

Nancy, back to appearing like the old woman she wasn't, was right behind my sister, the barrel of a shiny silver revolver aimed at Emma's head.

Behind me, Cashman finally got to his feet. He had quit groaning and was now laughing.

"About fucking time, Mom," he said. "What took you so long?"

## 25

"Humans are stupid. Not pathetic, okay? Don't go confusing my words like that. After everything your species has gone through and survived, I can't quite call you pathetic. But stupid? You better believe it."

We were back in the warehouse district, parked in a black sedan. The river was in front of us; a large abandoned building was directly to our left.

"See, David, I knew what you were going to do even before you did. Trying to get the ring off your finger was a waste of time. Yeah, I should have known it from the start, but still I wanted to try. But then I was just getting pissed, and bored, and decided to mix things up. After all, we had time to kill before the Shadow Man could make an appearance."

Cashman was in the driver's seat, smoking a cigarette. I sat in the passenger seat. In the back was Nancy and Emma, Nancy holding her gun pointed straight at my sister's head.

"So we played a little trick on you, so what? Mom back there acted like she was scared, let you go, and immediately called me. I was waiting down the street the entire time. I'll give you credit though. I really didn't expect you to shoot at me like that. It took balls, and for that I salute you."

Glaring back at him, I said, "You didn't have to kill my parents."

"No, you're right. I didn't have to. I wanted to, and so I did. Just like I killed that cop. All I had to do was touch him, just get a sample of his DNA, and I could instantly copy him. But, well, the guy was an asshole, you know?"

"I don't understand why you're doing this anyway. I thought you said as long as I'm wearing this ring I'm invincible."

"*Practically* invincible," Cashman said, taking one last drag of his cigarette and stamping it out in the ashtray. "The keyword there is *practically*. Yeah, nothing can hurt you as long as you're wearing the ring. Why else do you think we brought your little sister along?"

In the backseat, Emma, who had managed to stay quiet this entire time, whimpered.

Cashman grinned at me. "See, your species is stupid."

"Where do you come from anyway? What planet?"

Both he and Nancy seemed to find this question quite amusing.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Cashman said, lighting another cigarette. "It's just a very human question for you to ask. See, my species, those things chasing you earlier, the Shadow Man, and a thousand other beings, we don't come from other planets. We just ... we come from other planes of existence."

"You mean like dimensions?"

Cashman shrugged. "If you prefer that word instead, sure."

"And what's so special about this ring?" I don't know why, but right then I thought as long as I kept him talking, kept him from hurting Emma, we would be okay. "Why is this Shadow Man coming for it?"

Cashman took a long drag of his cigarette, staring out his window. The surface of the river rippled, the lights reflected off it making it look like diamonds.

“Well?” I prompted.

“In every plane of existence—every dimension, as you like to say—there are different worlds. One big infinite universe, but a million different worlds. And that silver ring right there on your finger, it’s the one constant between them all.”

I glanced down at the ring, the thing which hadn’t glowed since I was back in the house.

“What are you saying—that it’s the most powerful thing in the universe?”

Cashman laughed again, shaking his head. “No, David, that’s where your human mentality stops you. The silver ring isn’t the most powerful thing in the universe. *It is the universe.*”

## 26

“The Shadow Man isn’t his real name, you know. Fact is, I don’t even know his real name. In his world, with his language ... well, it’s just easier to call him the Shadow Man. And let me tell you, he is one mean motherfucker. I’d put him right up there with Genghis Khan or Joseph Stalin. This guy, he pretty much took over his world. Those who refused to worship him, he killed. The ones who agreed to worship him are now his slaves.”

Cashman lit himself another cigarette, took a drag, puffed out three small smoke rings.

“So why are you helping him then?” I asked.

“Me and Mom, we’re kind of ... outcasts from our world. The Shadow Man promised us if we delivered the silver ring we could go back. Not only that, we’d be wealthy and powerful. Like royalty.”

“You don’t think he’s going to double cross you? Like use the silver ring to destroy your world?”

Cashman grinned as he kept staring out at the rippling water. “Kid, the Shadow Man wants to only destroy one world, and it’s this one.”

“Why?”

“Beats me. But the truth is nobody likes you humans. You’re all too arrogant. Self-centered. Nobody here wants to believe in the existence of other life in the universe because none of you want to share, even though it’s not like you’ll ever be able to visit other galaxies. Selfish bastards, that’s what humans are. You ask me, the Shadow Man would be doing the rest of the universe a favor.”

I glanced back at Emma, my little sister sitting with her head down, her hands in her lap. Nancy kept the gun trained on her head, the barrel steady.

“Let my sister go,” I whispered to Cashman.

He shook his head. “No can do, kid.”

“She doesn’t have to be here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“I can’t even take this stupid ring off even if I wanted to. So how the hell is the Shadow Man going to get his hands on it?”

Right then the streetlamp flickered. It was just small thing, nothing more than an unsteady flash, and Cashman clapped his hands.

“Showtime,” he said, stamping the cigarette out in the ashtray.

“What are you talking about?”

He jerked his head toward the warehouse. “The Shadow Man’s here.”

“But ... how do you know? The only thing that happened was the light flickered.”

“That’s right. How else do you think we travel between the planes of existence? We don’t use flying saucers. All we do is just burst through the fabric of your reality, and by doing so it creates an electrical shortage. Just a flicker, like you said, so nobody ever really thinks twice about it.”

He took a deep breath, smiled, and opened his door.

“Shall we?”

## 27

There was an electrical box just inside the door. Cashman had to flip the switch back and forth several times before something caught and the lights in the ceiling turned on.

The warehouse was huge. At least three stories tall, it stretched to about the size of half a football field. It was clear it would take awhile for the lights in the ceiling to come on fully.

Unfortunately, Cashman didn’t want to waste anymore time.

He knew better than to bother with a gun. He just led me straight toward the center of the warehouse. Emma and Nancy trailed us, Nancy keeping her gun pressed against Emma’s head.

We had almost reached the midway point when a soft, low voice echoed in the darkness around us.

*“Stop ... ”*

We stopped.

*“You have done well, Cashman ... ”*

“Well,” Cashman said loudly, “I do what I can.”

*“The boy has the silver ring, yes? ... Let me see it ... ”*

The voice sounded like it was coming from every direction.

Cashman nudged me.

I raised my left hand up high.

“Yes ... ” the voice said, excited now. *“Very, very good ... ”*

Behind me, Emma began sobbing.

I wanted to turn back to her, try to say something comforting, but right then the Shadow Man showed himself.

He sort of materialized in front of us. Pieces of darkness pulled from the edges of the warehouse, swirling about, until standing only a few feet away was the distinct shape of a man.

Cashman, despite his assurance the Shadow Man would not double cross him, slowly backed away.

I stayed motionless, staring back at this thing that began to form features: eyes, a nose, a mouth.

The mouth moved when it spoke.

*“Give me the ring ... ”*

“I can’t.”

The black eyes seemed to darken for an instant.

*“Do not play games with me, boy ... Give me the ring ... ”*

I held my hand up again, pulled at the ring that wouldn’t budge. “See, it won’t work,” I said, then I lowered all my fingers except the middle.

The black eyes seemed to flash even darker.

“Cashman”—the soft, low echo voice becoming harsher— *“bring me the girl ... ”*

Emma was still sobbing. She couldn’t seem to stop. She even tried running away when Cashman went for her, but he was quicker. He picked her up, carried her toward the Shadow

Man, and placed her on the ground. She tried to run again but the Shadow Man reached out with his dark hand and held her in place.

She screamed.

“Now, boy,” the Shadow Man said, “*give me the ring ...*”

“I told you, it won’t come off. See?”

And I frantically tried taking the ring off again, pulling as hard as I could.

It slid off my finger with no trouble at all.

“Yes ...” the Shadow Man said excitedly.

I stared down at the ring. Then I looked up at the Shadow Man and Emma. Then I looked over to my left, where Cashman and Nancy stood. They’d slowly been moving backward, as far as they could from us without making it too obvious. By now they were maybe thirty feet away.

“*What are you waiting for?*” the Shadow Man asked. “*Do you want me to kill your sister?*”

“No.”

“*Then give me the ring ... GIVE IT TO ME!*”

I kept staring down at the ring, expecting it to glow.

Blinking, I glanced up at the Shadow Man.

Glanced back down at the ring.

Glanced back up at the Shadow Man.

I didn’t understand—not everything—yet somehow I did.

“Fine,” I said. “You want the ring so badly, catch.”

And I tossed the ring, not in the Shadow Man’s direction, but in the direction of Cashman and Nancy.

They both knew what was going to happen before it did. Maybe Cashman was right; maybe his species was smarter than us humans.

Nancy made a sound like a strangled scream; Cashman just yelled.

The Shadow Man dissolved at once, the strands of darkness whipping in circles toward Cashman and Nancy.

And still the ring flew through the air, turning over and over.

Less than fifteen feet away ... less than ten ... less than five ...

It began to glow when it reached the two of them.

The Shadow Man reached them at the same time.

He materialized suddenly, catching the glowing silver ring in both black hands—

And at once there was an explosion of bright intense light, followed directly by screams and cries of anguish.

It was only there for a second or two, nothing more, and then the light blinked out. The screams and cries stopped. Cashman and Nancy and the Shadow Man were gone. All that was left was the silver ring, now falling to the ground.

I started walking then, not toward the ring but toward my sister.

Emma was sobbing again, and I lowered myself to my knees, wrapped my arms around her, held her tight. I smoothed back her hair with my hand—the hand that had just seconds ago worn the silver ring—and I whispered to her that it was okay, that everything was okay.

The lights in the ceiling flickered and we were suddenly no longer alone.

## 28

Before there had been only three figures in long blue robes and cowls. Now there were three *hundred*, all crammed into the warehouse, surrounding us.

I had managed to get Emma to calm down, sobbing into my shirt. But when she sensed the figures around us, she looked up and screamed.

I stood up, keeping a hand on my sister's shoulder. It had only been a minute since I took the silver ring off but already I felt lost without it.

All the figures were motionless, the round darkness of their cowls facing us. Only one moved forward, the one closest to the ring. It reached out a pale, skeletal hand, picked the ring up and cupped it in its palm. It slowly began to approach us.

Emma screamed again, holding onto me now, her fingernails digging into my leg.

“What do you want?” I asked.

The figure kept approaching.

My sister's fingernails digging even deeper, I shouted, “*What do you want?*”

The figure came to a stop only a few feet away. For some reason I expected to smell something awful coming from its body—decay and death—but there was no scent at all.

Beside me, Emma had buried her face in my stomach.

I stood my ground, keeping my hand on her shoulder.



The figure raised its hand, the one cupping the silver ring ... which had begun to glow.

*The silver ring thanks you*, said a voice both inside and outside my head.

“For what?”

For helping eliminate the Shadow Man.

“That’s not his real name.”

No, but you could never even begin to comprehend his real name.

“Why me?”

Why not you?

“People died. My parents died.”

Many people die. It is just the way of the universe.

“That’s not the type of universe I want to be part of.”

The figure didn’t reply. The ring in its hand kept glowing.

“What are you anyway?”

We are the protectors of the silver ring. The protectors of the universe.

“Yeah? Well judging by the past twenty-four hours, you’re lousy at your job.”

We do only what the ring commands. And it commanded us to come here to this planet so it could find you.

Emma had loosened her grasp on my leg, still scared but understanding that these figures meant us no harm.

“Now what happens?”

Now the ring will grant you one request for your troubles.

I glanced down at my sister, glanced back at the figure. I shook my head.

“I want nothing from the ring.”

The ring knows what you want. It also knows you think it cannot work. But you are wrong.

“How? Cashman and the Shadow Man ... they would still be alive.”

Remember, both time and space are infinite. They cross over into one another. What has happened here tonight will never change.

I glanced down at my sister.

Emma, tears drying on her face, looked up at me.

“What do you want to do?” I asked her quietly.

She whispered, “I just wanna go home.”

I looked back up at the figure, at the silver ring still glowing in its cupped hand, and nodded.

“Let’s do it.”

## 29

Five minutes before a man with a gun planned to enter the store, two little girls cut in front of me in line.

It wasn’t really their fault. I was waiting in line, yeah, but this being a convenience store, the tabloid magazines were stored on a rack beneath the counter, and I was turned toward them, reading the ridiculous headlines about even more ridiculous celebrities. Above me, the speakers in the ceiling poured some a song by Bruce Springsteen.

It was summer and the temperature was stifling and for the past week after work I’d been stopping in for a slushie. The movie theater where I worked was having a promotion with this chain of stores: bring in your ticket stub for a free sixteen ounce soda or slushie. The theater floors always littered with stubs, I figured what the hey and stocked up on ticket stubs.

So I was standing there, a Cherry Coke slushie in one hand and reading a recent headline about Tom Cruise, when the man who’d been in line before me finished his purchase and turned away. The two girls stepped up and threw candy bars down on the counter.

The cashier—a woman named Dorothy, who never seemed to have a night off because I always saw her in here—gave me a look, as if asking, *You mind?*

I shrugged, took a sip of my slushie, and reached into my pocket for a ticket stub. I pulled the ticket stub out, rubbed my thumb over the print, and then stepped aside when the two girls shouted “Thank you!” and turned away.

Neither one of them bumped into me as they hurried toward the entrance, an electronic buzzer going *ding-dong* when it opened and closed.

I stepped up to the counter and handed Dorothy my ticket stub.

As she punched some buttons on her screen she asked, “Did you enjoy the movie?”

“It was okay.”

“I’ve been meaning to see it. I’m a huge fan of his.”

“Me too,” I said, trying to remember what movie had been printed on the ticket stub.

“I loved him in that other movie. You know, the one about World War Two?”

I made a face, like I was trying to remember, and then shrugged. “I can’t think of it.”

“Oh well, no big deal. You have a good night now, okay?”

“Thanks. You too.”

That electronic buzzer went *ding-dong* when I left the store and then I just stood there on the curb sipping my slushie.

For the most part the city was quiet. I could hear a siren off in the distance. A few cars passed back and forth on the street.

And across the street, pacing back and forth, was a Hispanic man in a baggy gray hoodie. He kept looking at me, taking nervous drags on his cigarette.

I kept standing there, sipping my slushie. More than once I had the crazy notion of lifting my hand and waving. Maybe I’d yell something like, “Hey, Irving, how’s it hanging?” but maybe not.

Yes, I remembered his name. I remembered everything. That was the silver ring’s deal. I could go back but would be forced to remember all the events of the previous twenty-four hours. The silver ring didn’t seem to care that I would remember. After all, who would believe my story anyway?

Irving didn’t leave his spot across the street. He kept smoking, kept pacing, until a few minutes went by and the police cruiser pulled into the parking lot.

By then I had already finished my slushie. There was a little left in the bottom and I slurped it too fast, causing brain freeze.

The two cops got out of the cruiser. They headed for the entrance. As they walked I glanced across the street and saw Irving already hightailing it down the sidewalk.

“Evening, officers,” I said, opening the door for them.

Officer Titus walked by me without even a glance. Officer Mallory did what was expected and nodded at me and said thanks.

I let the door shut and just stood there for another minute or so. I took a deep breath and let it out. Then I tossed the empty cup in the trashcan and started for home.

Dad was standing outside our brownstone. He was talking on his BlackBerry, and when he saw me he turned away and said a few quick words before finishing his call, turning the phone off and slipping it into his pocket.

“Hey there, chief, how’s it going?”

I hadn’t realized it but as I walked down the sidewalk my hands had begun to clench into fists. I’d been thinking about this the entire way here—my dad’s continued infidelity even though he’d promised us he was done and would never do it again.

“Who were you just talking to?”

“Huh?”

“On your BlackBerry”—gesturing toward his pocket—“you were talking to someone when I walked up.”

“Oh, that. That was just business.”

I closed my eyes, took a breath, and unclenched my fists.

“Really? Well that’s good. I mean, as long as it’s just business, me and Mom and Emma have nothing to worry about. It’s not like you would ever ... well, you know. I mean, you did promise us it would never happen again. Right?”

He stared back at me, just stared for the longest time. Finally he nodded and said in a very soft voice, “Yeah, that’s right.”

The streetlamps along the block flickered. It was just a small thing, something hardly anybody would notice, but still I glanced around me, then up at the sky, before settling my gaze back on my dad.

“Good,” I said, and started up the steps.

Like before, he didn’t follow me and just stood there, staring down the block.

I let myself in and closed the door behind me.

My mom wheeled herself into the hallway. “Welcome home, honey.”

I leaned down, gave her a hug and kissed her on the cheek. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, David. Where’s your father?”

“Still outside on the phone. You know, business.”

“Yes,” she sighed.

Frantic footsteps pattered into the hallway, Emma shouting, “David’s home, David’s home!”

Mom said, “Little Miss Hyper here is ready for bed. Wanna tuck her in for me?”

“Of course.” I turned to my sister and grinned. “I’ll race you to the top.”

She was already turning away and scrambling up the stairs. I waited a few seconds and then hurried after, Mom laughing in that singsong way of hers as she watched us go.

“I win, I win, I win,” Emma cried when she reached the top, jumping up and down.

Of course she did; I always let her win.

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### **About the Author:**

Robert Swartwood was born in 1981. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Postscripts*, *Chizine*, *Space and Time*, *elimae*, *Wigleaf*, *PANK*, and *The Los Angeles Review*. He is the editor of *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer*, forthcoming from W.W. Norton. Visit him online at [www.robertswartwood.com](http://www.robertswartwood.com)