

THE BREADFRUIT EMPIRE

Severna Park

It was dark and already snowing when Bob, Lisa's father, pulled up in front of her high school in his half-dead Riviera. He rolled down the window and shouted across the empty sidewalk. "Your mother threw a rod. You're supposed to come home with me."

He'd said far worse things about her mother. Lisa didn't move from the cold brick wall and kept her attention on her K-Mart imitation Reeboks. The divorce had been final for almost a year, and he wasn't supposed to see her except on the last weekend of each month.

"Lisa, are you listening? We're supposed to get a foot and a half by morning. You can't sit there all night."

In fact, she could sit here all night. She spent hours after school waiting for her mother on this wall, hot or cold, doing homework or reading, ignoring classmates and strangers, particularly those who tried to speak to her in Spanish, thinking that because she was stamped with her mother's Guatemalan features, she would be friendlier in another language. She was not. She had no intention of being friendly to any of them.

"Leesa!" He climbed out of the battered old heap and came over with his hands in his pockets. His breath smoked in the Baltimore evening. He wasn't wearing a jacket. "Your mom's taking a bus home, but she won't get there until eight or nine. She told me to pick you up and get you some dinner. I'll take you to McDonald's."

"I don't want to go to McDonald's."

That seemed to make him happy. "Okay. We can go to that veggie place."

"I want to go home."

"Leese, I don't have a key to your mom's place. We could sit in front of the building and wait in the car, but ..." He made a theatrical, shivery shrug.

Lisa couldn't get into the apartment either. Her mother had as many paranoias about her father as her father had about her mother. His schemes. His plans. His weird fears. There was only one key, because to have two was to ask for an invasion just like this.

Lisa eyed the idling white Riviera which billowed exhaust like a demon chariot. Her knees were stiff and she could hardly feel her butt.

"Okay," she said.

He threw his arm over her shoulders. "That's my girl."

She wasn't his girl. When she was twelve, she had clamped onto this explanation for her life: Her father had been someone else but her mother had married this man, Bob Hall, the Breadfruit Entrepreneur, to escape the embarrassment of a bastard child and to get the hell out of Guatemala when Bob's Breadfruit Empire—if there had ever been such a thing—collapsed. This was Lisa's explanation to herself of why she didn't look like him and refused to think like him, but she despised her mother equally. She had less of an explanation for that, except that in biology class, when they had studied Nature versus Nurture, the mice she was supposed to raise had died.

She hugged her backpack against her chest and slumped in the car's low, overly-soft seat as snow rushed against the windshield and swirled around orange streetlights. The secret profits of the Breadfruit Empire were enough to buy a dilapidated old house just outside Baltimore, where Bob had spent the fifteen years of her lifetime dodging the IRS and burying solid silver coinage in the dirt floor of the basement. Of course that wasn't all. She suspected she would never know what else he had hidden behind the walls or under the floorboards. She didn't care either. She sincerely hoped the house would burn to the ground one day and that the remains of the Breadfruit Empire would vanish, with Bob, in a

puff of dirty smoke.

"Hey," she said as they turned north on the Expressway. "Where're we going?"

"The veggie place." He gestured vaguely and she knew he was taking her back to their old house.

She pushed herself up in the seat and peered out the window. Snow and construction barriers; trash and hard asphalt. She got a good grip on the door handle. He was going fifty-five, sixty, but with the door wide open, he might hit the brakes in a panic and she might be able to jump out. At the very least he might think twice about abducting her like this. She yanked the handle. The door made a clunking sound and swung open about four inches. The dark, salt-crusting highway rushed below. Cold wind swept in and lifted the trash in the footwells. Bob saw what she was doing, leaned over the wheel and mashed the accelerator to the floor.

The car lunged forward, pitching like a boat as Bob swerved between lesser vehicles. The door swung back and forth with every lurch and Lisa hauled it shut, heart pounding. Bob slowed down to fifty-five, sixty.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry, but I can't leave you with your mother."

"You're fucking kidnapping me," she said.

"Watch your mouth, young lady."

He pulled off at the Ruxton exit. Lisa stared out the passenger window, letting furious emanations rise off her body and drift over to Bob's side of the car. As soon as he stopped she would get out and run. She would call a cab. She would hitchhike. She would hide in someone's garage until morning. She would never let him take her away, like her mother had let him take her from Guatemala.

The Riviera floundered to the left and scraped in familiar gravel. Lisa let herself glance ahead into the uninterrupted dark of the half-mile driveway that led to the house where she'd grown up. In daylight, it was a two-story, unpainted Victorian in the middle of three acres of forest, remarkably isolated considering how close it was to the city. Normally, there would have been a gleam of light from the front porch through the bare trees, but now there was nothing except snow dropping softly through black branches, melting when it touched the hood of the car. Maybe Bob had torn the house down, she thought, and the idea nearly made her cry. Even before the divorce, Bob had turned the house into a fort. He'd wired in alarms against intruders on the roof and booby-trapped the basement. The old chicken-shack in the back part of the yard became his secret domain, with plywood over the windows and combination locks. Lisa's mother stood by for most of this, but she drew the line at boarding up the first-floor windows of the house. Curtains, Bob had said with savage conviction, won't protect you from anything, but her mother put her foot down, finally screaming in banshee Spanish until he backed off and settled for the mail-order motion detectors, which were ugly and blocky and made the curtains hang wrong, but that was just the way it was going to be.

Bob stopped the car and Lisa peered out. The house was still there, a flat silhouette against the pinkish snow-sky.

"Why's it so dark?" she said.

"It's not all that dark," said Bob. He reached over to open the glove compartment and gave her a flashlight. "Watch your step."

Lisa pulled her backpack out of the car and followed him up to the front porch, waiting while he tapped buttons on a remote, deactivating whatever he'd installed on the first floor. She aimed the flashlight up to her old bedroom window, expecting to see her childhood escape route—the arching limbs of ancient oak trees which should have been lying over the low slope of the roof. The branches were gone. The window was framed by empty pink sky and falling snow. She turned the flashlight on the trees. Bob had mutilated them. Every branch was cut back to the black trunk. The trees looked amputated and helpless.

"Here we go." Bob pushed the door open into the dense, high-security darkness of the house. She didn't need to ask what he was protecting her from. It wasn't the IRS or the CIA, or the far more likely Immigration and Naturalization Service coming after her mother. It was the aliens, who'd first landed on the roof when she was nine.

The proof was in the patched-over bullet holes through the second floor ceiling. Daddy must be shooting at something, her mother had told her over the echoing thunder of gunfire, either to make Lisa stop crying or to truly scare the shit out of her.

Bob lit a match and then a hurricane lamp. Lisa watched, freezing and appalled as black boards over the curtainless windows quivered in the yellow light.

"Didn't you pay the electric bill?" she said.

He blew out the match. "They turned me off six months ago. I closed my checking account."

She knew why. Cash didn't trace. He was probably paying for groceries with fifties from under the floorboards.

"I'll make you a sandwich," said Bob. He picked up the lamp and headed for the kitchen.

In the kitchen, there was a wood stove which hadn't been there before. Lisa looked around for the refrigerator and found an old-fashioned wooden icebox framed by stacks of cardboard boxes instead. Bob put the lamp on the kitchen table, hunched in front of the stove and began loading it with kindling. He lit another match and tossed it in. The fire licked up inside, making his face look sallow and gaunt.

"It'll be warm in a minute or two." He slapped his hands against his arms and grinned. "You want chicken salad or cheese?"

She eyed the icebox, calculating how long it would take for the mayonnaise to turn bad. "Cheese."

"Mustard or mayo?"

"Just bread."

He chuckled. "Getting to be a purist in your old age?"

She didn't say anything.

He lit a second lamp and shuffled around the kitchen taking a neatly formed, homemade loaf of bread out of a wooden box. He'd taught her how to make bread when she was too young to know that feeding yeast and kneading dough were all part of Taking a Stand. She didn't doubt he could make mustard or mayonnaise, or bouillon cubes or pure cane sugar. He put the cheese in front of her and went to get a knife. The stuff looked cold and hard, and was wrapped in familiar coarse cloth instead of grocery store plastic. She wondered if Bob had procured a cow.

"I want to go home," she said.

"I know you do, honey, but you can't tonight."

Did that mean she could go back to her mother's apartment in the morning?

He gave her the sandwich without a plate or even a paper towel. She bit into it, wanting a Coke and french fries more than anything else. The coarse bread and salty curd were tastes she'd grown up with and she chewed, trying to decide if the sensations in her mouth made her sad, or angry, or just sick to her stomach.

He set a tea kettle on the wood stove and Lisa glanced up to the shelf where the loose tea leaves and straining spoons were supposed to be. The shelf was empty. Bob opened a cardboard box, rummaged through it and came up with the tea, a cup and a little wicker strainer.

Lisa stopped chewing. No electricity. No heat. Stacks of boxes.

He was moving out. He was going to take her with him.

This blinding revelation made the kitchen even darker. She swallowed and studied the pattern of bites in the sandwich, not wanting to let him know that she'd figured out what he was up to. She wondered if he was going to tell her what was going on, or if he would bundle her into the car again,

pretending to take her to her mother's apartment.

"I want to call mom," she said. "She doesn't know where I am."

He nodded toward the dining room where the phone was. "Good idea."

She took a hurricane lamp with her and set it next to the phone. The receiver was like a block of ice, and there was no dial tone. She checked the wire to the phone and from the phone into the wall jack. She tugged on them to make sure there was a connection, and stood there for a while, letting the silent earpiece warm against her cheek.

"The line's dead," she said.

"Must be the snow," he lied, out of sight. "You remember how we used to lose the phone in the winter? We'd go for days before they fixed it."

She touched the keys, dialing her mother's number twice, like a spurt of code from a sinking ship. She laid the receiver on the sideboard, off the hook, and went back into the kitchen.

"You know," he said as she forced the rest of the sandwich into her mouth, "you never got a chance to clear out your room before your mother took you away. You've still got toys and books and all sorts of things up there."

She shrugged.

"Well," he said, "could you pack up the stuff you want? I'm thinking about renting out the house."

As if, she thought, and resisted the urge to ask who else might want an alien-proof fort to call their own.

"I could stand to live in a smaller place," he said. "Further out in the country. You know? I'll give you some boxes and you can pack up tonight before you go to bed."

Jesus Christ, she thought. He's not going to tell me anything. We're just going to vanish.

Upstairs the windows were unblocked. The pinkish haze of the night sky and the snow at least gave the illusion of normality. Lisa sat on the bed and waited for him to stoke up the wood stove which had never been in her room before. It was an immense cast-iron thing and took up most of one wall. A couple of logs and the room would be so hot, she'd have to open the window. The best thing was to pretend that she wouldn't bolt for the main road as soon as he looked away. Even if she fell off the roof, the drop wasn't far enough to really hurt. She fallen out of the trees half a dozen times, and only needed stitches once.

She wanted to know what made this the right night for her to be kidnapped, but there was no point in asking. He would tell her he'd gotten secret messages through the fillings in his teeth, or he'd had the most amazing dream, or worse, act wounded.

Bob closed the stove's iron door over the hot, roaring sound of the fire and eased down next to her on the bed. "Don't you miss being home?" He meant here. Not her mother's new apartment with the automatic dishwasher and cable TV.

He pointed at the wooden shelves littered with the things she'd left behind a year ago. "You didn't even take your art." He meant her colored-pencil drawings of flowers and birds. Bob had told her about Darwin, given her a copy of *The Voyage of the Beagle* to read, hoping, she supposed, that it would inspire her to think "outside the box" or maybe to Take a Stand on her own, but what she'd been fascinated by were the engravings of the exotic animals and plants, the foreign flowers, so lush and strange and improbable. The pictures spoke to her in a way Darwin didn't and during the summer she would collect blossoms and feathers from deep in the surrounding woods and copy them in colored pencil in the cool shade of the attic eaves.

She'd left behind everything that reminded her of him. "That's just stuff for kids."

He put his hands on his knees and frowned at the floor. It was his position of confession. She'd seen

it often enough when her mother would demand to know what'd happened to his paycheck—when he was working—and he would have to tell her that he'd ordered more motion detectors, or a telescope, or a special camera lens which could filter out reality and pick up the presence of ghosts.

When she was very young, Lisa couldn't understand why her mother would get so angry. Bob's fantasy world was much more interesting than hers. The problem was, his was threatening and solid enough—to Bob, at least—to be shot at.

"I know your mom doesn't think much of me," he said, "but I still love her. You know? I love you both. She thinks that I think she owes me for pulling her out of Guatemala when things got bad down there, but I don't. I never have. I love her for who she is. It's never been anything less than that."

Her feet were starting to get warm. The bread and cheese, which had formed a hard, lardish lump in her stomach, began to soften, but she didn't say anything. He'd tried this angle before. He'd made her cry hard and honestly, but afterwards she'd felt his feelings and opinions squeezing out what she'd been certain of before. When her mother talked about him later, Lisa heard his words cutting their way out of her own mouth. He'd twisted her into a weapon before, so this time she concentrated on the heat from the stove instead of his voice, thinking that the way the fire sounded was like hot fists beating on black iron.

There was another sound and he stopped talking. She listened. Engines. Big engines, like trucks coming up the half-mile driveway. He went to the window and Lisa tried to see around him, hoping hard for red and blue police lights.

Bob turned around. "Pack up everything you want, Leese."

He hurried out of her room and pounded down the stairs.

She got off the bed and squinted through the dirty glass. Downstairs, she heard a generator start. Floodlights came on around the house, washing the snow in garish white. At the end of the driveway, a Winnebago camper lumbered out in the dark without its headlights on, crawled through the yard and stopped just under her window. A burly man in a parka climbed out and Bob ran over, saluting and pumping his hand. Another engine rumbled in the trees. Another camper and then a pickup pulling a dull silver Airstream trailer. People piled out, bundled in Army surplus, saluting and slapping each other on the back. If there'd been a couple of barbecue grills and a case of beer, it would have been a tailgate party.

"Fuck," Lisa whispered.

He wasn't leaving by himself. He was going with friends.

She unlocked the window, sweating in the heat of the wood stove. The Winnebago was parked just under the eaves. She could climb across the roof and drop onto it without any trouble. She hauled on the window, knowing how it stuck in cold, wet weather, hoping Bob hadn't nailed the entire house shut. The window scraped in its frame, resisted and finally groaned upwards, two inches, four. Snow blew in. The people in their Army surplus headed for the front porch as Bob beckoned them inside and in a minute there was just snow and Winnebagos and a huge dog barking from inside the Airstream. Lisa heaved as hard as she could and shoved the window up in the sash. It slammed the top of the frame, loud as a gunshot. She stood still, the heat of the stove at her back and the cold air blowing in her face, certain everyone below had heard, but no one came out to look up.

She put a foot over the familiar sill and clambered sideways onto the roof on her hands and knees, gloveless in five inches of snow. Without the oak branches the roof was a foreign territory and she had to search for her old footholds in the copper gutters. Snow brushed the back of her neck in cold feathers as she found the place where she could put her feet on either side of a downspout. She slid backwards, digging her fingers around runnels of ice and frozen moss between slate shingles. Her knees slid into the gutters and she edged over the side of the roof, balanced on her stomach until she snagged the downspout between her ankles. The Winnebago was like a landing pad, much further away than she'd thought. She inched down, her coat bunching at her waist, catching in the gutter. She hung by her elbows, clamped her knees around the downspout and felt it shift under her weight. She let go with her knees,

scrambled for a better hold on the gutter and felt the copper bend. Soft, rotted wood under the eaves gave way. Two stone shingles slid past her head and the gutter creaked. It broke away from the side of the house in slow motion and for one suspended moment, Lisa wondered how fragile the top of a Winnebago might be. The roof bent when she hit it. She lost her balance in the wet skim of snow and fell again. Her left leg crunched through the top of the camper.

She grabbed her knee where she'd punched through the plastic roof. Light framed her leg from underneath. Snow fell around her in huge heavy flakes. She tried to pull her leg free and felt the rest of the roof give. Brittle plastic crumbled under her. Lisa yelped and fell another four feet onto the camper's kitchen table. She held still, expecting someone to run out with a shotgun, but nothing happened. How much noise had she made? What could Bob hear through three-quarter-inch plywood? Snow fell steadily through the jagged opening above her and she could see a dozen metal patches in the ceiling, as though someone had perforated the roof with bullets, just like Bob.

Lisa sat up. Her knee was bleeding through her jeans and her fingers were purple with cold. Outside the dog in the Airstream barked on. Bob's generator floodlights shone through the hole in the roof and the curtained windows with remarkable brilliance, illuminating the crates marked Breadfruit Especial, producto de Guatemala. Slatted wooden produce crates. They covered every square foot of floor between the Winnebago's front seats and microscopic bathroom. There wasn't even space to walk.

Lisa slid to the edge of the table and put her feet carefully on the crates. Leathery-looking ovals with reddish speckles were packed inside, separated by sheets of bubble wrap, visible through the wooden slats. She'd seen engravings of breadfruit in the Beagle's lithograph plates, and these were not breadfruit. Lisa put her weight on the top of the closest crate. The leathery things crunched like eggs. A kerosene smell drifted out of them. She crunched her way to the camper's side door, limping through debris from the ceiling. She saw the cell phone hanging in a pouch from the back of the passenger seat, grabbed it and eased out the door. Outside, she ducked under the eaves where the floodlights didn't reach and hobbled for the deeper darkness of the back yard and Bob's alien-proof shack.

The front door of the shed was padlocked, but there was a back entrance with a sort of Chinese-puzzle lock, which Bob had invented himself, and which she'd had to master before he'd give her any presents for her tenth birthday. She fumbled with the works, holding the phone in her armpit, snow sticking in her hair and eyelashes. The lock gave and she blundered into the pitch blackness inside.

Lisa crouched on the cold dirt floor with the phone and soaked sneakers and punched in her mother's number. She unblocked the peephole in the shack's padlocked front entrance and peered out, teeth chattering, the phone pressed hard against the side of her face. All she could see was falling snow, campers, and the floodlights shining in the tracks she'd left. The phone rang and rang and rang.

She hung up on her mother's empty apartment and dialed 911. The line clicked once and connected. "Hello?" she whispered, "hello?"

You have reached Emergency Assistance. Because of inclement weather the number of emergency calls has increased. Your call may not be answered immediately. Please stay on the line. An operator will assist you. You have reached Emergency Assistance. Because of inclement weather ...

She clenched her teeth, trying not to scream.

Please stay on the line ...

She paced back and forth in the tiny space, freezing. There were candles and matches on a shelf. Would Bob be able to see it if she lit one? Did it matter? He would figure out where she was anyway. She squeezed the phone between her shoulder and her ear and struck a match. The flame wavered over more crates stacked in the corner. Breadfruit Especial.

You have reached Emergency Assistance ...

She lit a candle, stuck it into a clear space on Bob's workbench and tried warming her hands over it. Bob kept his craziest crap in this shed—the stuff her mother had no patience for. All of it was familiar.

Here was a jar of withered, bony things floating in formaldehyde that Bob said were alien fingers amputated from the rest of the alien hand. Here were the videos Bob had taken of the house, night after night for a month. She'd watched them with him, searching for suspicious objects in the sky, but he'd run out of tapes two weeks before the aliens had actually landed on the roof. After that, in the wildest frenzy Lisa could remember, Bob had set up motion detectors in the back yard and a still-camera on a tripod. The result of that was his "proof," the photo blown up to eleven by fourteen inches, and nailed to the wall of the shed like a trophy: the house in the middle of the night, luminesced in a hazy green aura, globs of light hovering in a triangular formation over the chimney. Lisa eyed the photo, thinking of the developing errors she'd seen her friends make in photography class.

The cell phone crackled. *Emergency 911. Do you need police, fire or ambulance?*

A real human being. She wanted to scream into the receiver, All three!

"My dad's trying to kidnap me!" Her voice came out in a weird shriek. "He's divorced from my mom, and I'm—"

I'll connect you with county police.

There was a blank sound on the line. Lisa peered through the peephole again. Bob was outside, a silhouette under the floods. He turned and the glare of a huge flashlight lanced over the shed. The dog in the Airstream barked louder, more insistent.

County police. Give me your address and phone number please.

"We don't have a phone—" She realized how ludicrous that sounded, and blurted out the address. "My dad's trying to kidnap me. I can't get away. I can't call my mom. His crazy friends are here and they're—"

Ma'am, are you in any kind of physical danger?

"What?"

Are you being threatened, ma'am? Are you being hurt or attacked?

"No, but ..."

I'm sorry, but we can't respond to non-emergency situations. We've got lootings and gunfire downtown. If you're not in physical danger, we can't help you tonight.

The line went dead.

Lisa stared at the phone, open-mouthed. Outside, Bob was coming closer. She stumbled backwards, ready to unbolt the back entrance and flee into the woods. She hit the lit candle with her elbow and it fell over on the stack of videos. For a second nothing happened. She could have picked up the candle and nothing would have happened. Then the plastic caught. Smoke curled up in a tendril. A slender flame reached for the wooden ceiling. Lisa fumbled with the puzzle lock, shoved the door open and ran into the darkness where the yard met the woods.

The snow had thickened to a blizzard. She crouched in it with her aching knee and freezing feet. Nine one one. The keypad lit up with the same weird green as in the photograph of her house.

Please stay on the line.

Inside the shack, the videos were burning. She caught a glimpse of the green-aura photo of the house, peeling, burning and finally vanishing in an emerald flare. Bob's flashlight swung over the dark yard and Lisa ducked behind the nearest tree, hidden in leaping black shadows. Flames licked out of the shed. She heard Bob yell.

Now the dog was barking frantically, banging around in the trailer. Men came running from the house with fire extinguishers, yelling and sliding in the wet snow. The ceiling of the shed was completely engulfed but Bob ran inside without hesitation as his friends fumbled with their fire extinguishers.

"Lisa!"

Please stay on the line.

Bob started throwing anything he could grab out of the shed. A cardboard box. An armload of folders. The jar of alien fingers hit a tree and broke.

He heaved a crate of breadfruit into the snow and the crate burst open. One leathery breadfruit rolled into the woods and stopped almost at Lisa's feet. It was no bigger than her fist. She picked it up as a live human voice interrupted the recording.

Emergency 911. Do you need police, fire or ambulance?

"Fire!" she screamed into the receiver. "Fire! Fire!"

Bob heard her and bolted into the thin woods. He grabbed her arm and hauled her up. "Dammit! Dammit!" He saw the cellphone. "Who're you calling?"

"The fire department!" she shouted. "Who the hell do you think I'm calling?"

There was another noise over the roar of fire—something louder than the yelling men or the hysterical dog. It sounded like a helicopter.

Bob's grip tightened on her arm. Through the net of bare branches, the pink sky changed color. Not to the shock-white helicopter searchlights. It brightened to a thick, unhealthy green.

"Oh, fuck," said Bob.

The helicopter sound intensified to a screaming pitch. The men with the fire extinguishers stared upwards as the shed's roof collapsed.

Lisa felt Bob's hand loosen on her arm. She stepped away, frozen in her soaking shoes and wet coat. Bob, his friends, the Winnebagos and the Airstream glowed in the nightmare fluorescence, suspended in the moment. Even the snow seemed to hang in the air, weightless, motionless. The only thing she could hear was the disembodied voice from the cellphone, shouting, *Are you there? Are you there?*

Maybe that was what snapped Bob out of it. He groped inside his jacket and pulled out a huge gun. He aimed at the sky and started shooting. POW! Like the night he'd shot holes in the roof. POW! Lisa turned and ran in clumsy, sliding steps, still holding the breadfruit and the cellphone. POW! Past the Winnebago, the glowing Airstream and the dog, leaping and frothing on the other side of the window. POW! She was in the driveway under denser trees. BLAM BLAM BLAM! More guns behind her. She kept on running, shoes squishing icewater. Headlights reared through the trees and over all the racket, she heard the familiar untuned rattle of her mother's car.

The dirty little Honda slid to a stop in the cold mud. Her mom, face stained by dashboard light and set like some ancient Guatemalan warrior-woman, punched the passenger door open. Lisa threw herself in, didn't even have the door shut before her mom slammed the car into reverse and gunned it backwards down the entire driveway. She shot onto the main road, threw the car into a forward gear and sped down the glassy asphalt, grim in the mouth, tight around her eyes.

"I tried to call you," panted Lisa.

"I knew where you were."

Lisa twisted to look back but there was nothing to see. Through the black branches, the sky looked normal. She watched until her mother turned onto the expressway.

"What was the thing in the sky?" asked Lisa.

Her mother scowled at the deserted highway. "Put it this way. You won't be getting any more child-support. I just hope he still had life insurance."

"Bob's gone?"

"Bob's gone."

Lisa held up the breadfruit so her mother could see. "This isn't a breadfruit. Is it?"

Her mother eyed the thing. She slowed down and stopped the car in the middle of the empty highway. "Give it to me."

"But what is it?"

"It's ready to hatch, Lisa. Give it to me."

Lisa did. Her mom opened the door and put the thing on the concrete. She edged the car forward in the pink-lit blizzard until Lisa heard the speckled shell crunch. Her mom slammed the door and started driving again, faster and faster.

"Was it an egg?" said Lisa. "An alien egg?"

Her mother didn't answer. Snow rushed against the windshield, too thick to see through.

"You have to tell me what's going on," said Lisa. "I'm old enough to know."

Her mother shook her head so hard the car swerved back and forth.

"Slow down," said Lisa. "You're going to get us killed."

Her mother checked the rearview mirror and took her foot off the gas.

Lisa let out her breath. "Did he take the eggs away from Guatemala, like he took you? Like he took me? Did he, like, abduct them?"

"Close enough," said her mother. "That's close enough."

"But why?" said Lisa.

"Because he wanted proof, Lisa."

Like the photograph nailed to the wall of the shed. Three globs of light, alien fingers, and bullet holes in the ceiling. "So that thing in the sky was coming to get its eggs back?"

"They got them this time." Her mom nodded grimly at the snowy road.

"Baby," she said, "what you saw back there was the last big battle of the Breadfruit Empire."