

Stone Man

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Here's a walk down the Mean Streets of today's big cities, which can be made even meaner by battling wizards—unless you can get a little help from your friends . . .

Nancy Kress began selling her elegant and incisive stories in the mid seventies and has since become a frequent contributor to Asimov's Science Fiction, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, OMNI, Sci Fiction, and elsewhere. Her books include the novel version of her Hugo- and Nebula-winning story, "Beggars in Spain," and a sequel, Beggars and Choosers, as well as The Prince of Morning Bells, The Golden Grove, The White Pipes, An Alien Light, Brainrose, Oaths and Miracles, Stinger, Maximum Light, Probability Moon, Probability Sun, Probability Space, Crossfire, and Nothing Human. Her short work has been collected in Trinity and Other Stories, The Aliens of Earth, and Beaker's Dozen. Her most recent book is the novel Crucible. In addition to the awards for "Beggars in Spain," she has also won Nebula Awards for her stories "Out of All Them Bright Stars" and "The Flowers of Aulit Prison."

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J

JARED Stoffel never even saw the car that hit him. He ollied off the concrete steps of the Randolph Street Rec Center down onto the street and was coming down on his skateboard when *wham!* his butt was smacked hard enough to rattle his teeth and Jared went down. A second before the pain registered, he threw up his arms to shield his face. The Bird-house went flying—he saw it in the air, wheels spinning, a moment before his body hit the street. All at once he was smothered under *a ton of stones he couldn't breathe he was going to die and someone was screaming but it was mostly the rocks—God the boulders flying to land on top of him, under him, everywhere . . .* Everything went black.

* * * *

"YOU with us yet, child?"

“Rocks.” It came out “bogs.” Jared put his hand to his face. The hand stopped an inch away on his swollen mouth.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Who.”

“What day is it?”

“Breeday.”

“Just rest a while. You took a nasty fall.” The blurry old nurse dressed in some stupid pants with yellow ducks on them stuck a needle in Jared’s arm and went away.

When he came to again, everything was clearer. A TV on a shelf high up near the ceiling droned out some news about an earthquake someplace. An old man in a white coat sat in a chair by Jared’s bed, reading. Jared tried to sit up, and the man rose and eased him back down. “Just stay quiet a little longer.”

“Where am I?”

“Perry Street Medical Center. You got hit by a car while skateboarding, but you have nothing more than two fractured ribs and a lacerated hand. You’re a very lucky young man.”

“Oh, right. Just lousy with luck.” The words came out correctly; his lips weren’t nearly as swollen. The tiny room had no windows. How long had he been in here?

“I’m Dr. Kendall and I need some information. What’s your name, son?”

“I’m not your son.” Jared lay trying to remember this accident. Shawn— he’d been skateboarding with Shawn. Shawn had yelled when Jared got hit. “Shawn?”

“Your name’s Shawn? Shawn What?”

“I’m not Shawn, dumb-ass. He’s my friend, with me. Where’s Shawn?”

The doctor grimaced. “Some friend. He took off running as soon as

the ambulance arrived. What were you two doing that he didn't want to get caught? Never mind, I don't want to know. But I do need to know your name."

"Why?"

"To notify your parents, for one thing."

"Forget it. She won't come."

Something moved behind the doctor's eyes. He glanced up at the TV, still showing pictures of an earthquake, then returned to watching Jared closely. Too closely. The guy was maybe fifty, maybe sixty, with white hair, but that didn't mean he couldn't be a—was he even really a doctor? Jared said, "Hey, stop staring like that, sicko."

"Ah," the doctor said sadly. "I see. Damn. But I still need to know your name. For the records we—"

"I don't got any insurance. So you can just let me out of here now." Again Jared tried to sit up.

"Lie down, son. We can't release you yet. Now please tell me your name."

"Jared."

"Jared What?"

"None of your business." If he didn't say any more, maybe they'd throw him out of here. The doc said he wasn't hurt bad. He could crash at Shawn's. If Ma saw him like this, she'd smash the Birdhouse for sure. She— "Hey! Where's my deck?"

"Your what?"

"My deck! The Bird! My skateboard!"

"Oh. I'm afraid I don't know."

"You mean you just left it in the *street*?" Gone now, for sure. And it had been a huge set of trouble to steal it!

Again that strange expression in Kendall's eyes. He said quietly,

“Jared, I will personally replace your skateboard, buy you a brand-new and very good one, if you will answer some questions for me first.”

“You? Buy me a new deck? For giving you what?”

“I already told you. All you need do is answer some questions.”

“Nobody gives away new decks for free!”

“I will, to you.” Kendall’s eyes, Jared saw, were light brown, full of some emotion Jared didn’t understand. But he wasn’t picking up rip-off vibes from the man. Hope surged through him. A new deck . . . maybe an Abec four . . .

He squashed the hope. Hope just got you hurt.

Kendall reached into his pocket and drew out a wad of bills. “How much does a good skateboard cost?”

Jared’s eyes hung on the money. He could get a Hawk deck . . . good trucks and wheels . . . “Two hundred dollars.” Maybe the old guy didn’t know what stuff cost.

Kendall counted ten twenties and held them out in his closed hand. “After you answer three questions.”

“Just three? Okay, but better not try anything perv.”

“First, your name and address.”

“Jared Parsell, 62 Randolph.”

Kendall withdrew his hand. “You’re lying.”

How did the old bastard *know*? “Wait, don’t put the money away...I’m Jared Stoffel, and I live at 489 Center Street.” When he lived anywhere at all. Ma, strung out on crystal most of the time, only noticed when he screwed up, not when he stayed away. She was pretty lame about time.

Kendall said, “When were you born?”

“April 6, 1993.”

Closing his eyes, Kendall moved his lips silently, as if figuring

some-thing. Finally, he said, as if it mattered, “Full moon.”

“Whatever.”

“Now the last question: How did all those stones get around you during the hit-and-run?”

“What?”

“When the ambulance arrived, you were lying on, and were covered with, small stones. They appear to have come from a flower bed on the other side of the Recreation Center. How did they get with you?”

A vague memory stirred in Jared’s mind. Rocks—he was being smothered with rocks, and someone—him—said “bogs.” And Shawn yelled something as Jared fell, something Jared couldn’t remember now . . . Jared had thought the rocks were in his mind—something from, like, the pain of the accident. Not real. But maybe . . .

Kendall was watching him sadly. Why sad? This old psycho gave Jared the creeps.

“I don’t know anything about any stones.”

“You and Shawn weren’t playing some game involving the stones? Throwing them at cars or something?”

“Jesus, man, I’m thirteen, not eight!”

“I see,” Dr. Kendall said. He handed the two hundred dollars to Jared, who seized it eagerly, even though leaning forward caused pain to stab through his torso. Jared moved his legs toward the end of the bed.

Kendall eased them back. “Not yet, son, I’m afraid.” He looked even sadder than before.

“Get your hands off me! I answered your stupid questions!”

“Yes, and the money is yours. But you can’t leave yet. Not until you see one other person.”

“I don’t want to see any more doctors!”

“It’s not a doctor. *I’m* a doctor. Larson is a . . . well, you’ll see.

Lar-son!”

The door opened and another man entered. This one was young, big, tough-looking, with long hair and a do-rag. He wore a leather jacket and gold necklace, serious gold. A dealer, maybe a gangbanger, maybe even a leader. Or a narc. He stood at the end of Jared’s bed, big hands resting lightly on the metal railing, and stared unsmiling. “So is he, Doc?”

“Yes.”

“You sure? Never mind, I know you don’t make mistakes. But, God... *look* at him.”

“Look at your dumb-ass self,” Jared said, but even to him the words sounded lame. Larson scared him, although he wasn’t going to admit that.

“Watch your mouth, kid,” Larson snarled. “I don’t like this any better than you do. But if you are one of us, then you are. The doc doesn’t make mistakes. Damn it to hell anyway!”

“If I’m what? What am I?” Jared said.

“A wizard,” Dr. Kendall said. “You’re a wizard, Jared. As of now.”

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LARSON left the explanations to Kendall. With a disgusted look over his shoulder at the hospital bed, Larson stormed out, slamming the door. Jared caught the scandalized look of a passing nurse just before the door shook on its hinges.

“A wizard. Yeah, right,” Jared said. “Any minute now I’m gonna turn you into a pigeon. No, wait—you’re already a pigeon if you believe that crap.”

“I’m afraid it’s true,” Kendall said. “During your accident you sum-moned those rocks. The smoothest stones from the flower bed flew through the air and landed on you, under you, around you. You skidded across the pavement on them as if on ball bearings. That broke your fall, maybe saved your life.”

“Right. Anything you say.”

“You were born under the full moon, also a requirement, although we

don't know why. You—”

“And you're a wizard, too, huh?”

“No,” Kendall said sadly, “I'm not. I can spot one, is all, and so the Brotherhood uses me.”

“Uh-huh. So you can't, like, show me something wizardy right now, and Larson left before he had to. Convenient.”

“Nothing 'wizardy' could be done here anyway. Not here, in the presence of metal. Not by any wizard now living.” Kendall leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “Magic is very old, Jared, much older than even the most primitive civilization. It governs only the things found in nature, and it cannot operate near to the things that are not. The only reason you could summon those stones at all is because your skateboard went flying, you weren't carrying a cell phone, and you had on pull-on running shorts with no zipper.”

“You leave my shorts out of this,” Jared said. “How come I never did any magic before, huh? You tell me that?”

“That's easy. Your accident. The ability to do magic, among those who possess it at all, is only released in the presence of pain.”

“Pain?”

“Yes, Jared,” Kendall said quietly. “Everything in life costs, even magic. The price is pain.”

This was the first thing the old man had said that made any sense to Jared. He knew things cost. He knew about pain.

But the rest of it was pure psycho bull. And bull with a reason. He said, “So now you tell me I'm going to one of those wizard schools, huh? Like in that book? Only guess what—it'll really turn out to be just another lock-down, like Juvie.”

“There is no such thing as a wizard school. All we have is the Brotherhood, and that all too inadequate to its task.”

“Listen, this sucks. I'm outta here, man. What do I gotta sign?”

“You're a minor. A parent must sign your release forms.”

“Like that’s gonna happen. My mom’s strung out most of the time and my dad’s long gone. You wait on a parent, I’ll be here forever. Where’s my clothes?”

“You can’t—”

“Watch me. I ain’t waiting here for Child Services to stick me in a foster home. And I ain’t listening to no more of your bull, neither.”

“You can talk better than that when you want to,” Kendall said. “I’ve heard you do so. Here, if you’re really going—no, your shoes are in that cupboard over there—take this. It’s my home address. You can come see me anytime you want, Jared. For any reason.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” He found the shoes, finished dressing, and walked out of the medical center. He had to lean twice against walls to do it, breathing deeply and fighting his own stomach, but he did it.

“Welcome to the Brotherhood, Jared,” Kendall said sadly.

“Forget you,” Jared said.

* * * *

IT was a week before he could make it out of the house. He lay in his bed-room, fighting the pain, distracting himself with the songs on the radio and with the Game Boy he’d stolen three months ago. Ma had sold the Xbox, but he’d hidden the Game Boy and the radio behind the broken dishwasher, and she hadn’t found them. He should have gotten painkillers before he left the clinic. The old doc would probably have given him some, but Jared hadn’t thought of it. Fortunately, it was one of the times when there was food in the house. Ma’s new guy, whom Jared encountered in the kitchen in his underwear, liked to eat well.

After a week the bedclothes, not too clean to begin with, stank, but Jared felt better. He knew he was better because he was bored. The day af-ter that he dressed and went out. He didn’t find anybody on the street. Then he remembered that school had started.

He walked to Benjamin Franklin Middle School, scowled at the secu-rity guard, and passed through the metal detector. When classes changed, kids flooded into the halls.

“Hey! Shawn!”

Shawn Delancey glanced up from the girl he was talking to, and a strange expression crossed his face. He nodded coolly. Jared hobbled over to him.

“I’m back, man.”

“Yeah, I see.”

“So what you doing here? In school?”

Shawn didn’t answer. He turned back to the girl, without introducing her. Jared felt his face grow hot.

“Hey, you dissing me, Shawn?”

“I’m busy right now. Can’t you see that?”

This had never happened before. He and Shawn were *tight*, had always been tight. The girl snickered. Jared limped away.

The prick, the bastard . . .

But he couldn’t let it go. He caught Shawn later, leaving school after fourth period, carrying his deck. Jared stepped out from an alley and said, “Shawn. What’s wrong, man?”

“Nothing. I gotta go.”

Anger and hurt made him desperate. “Dude, it’s me! Me!”

Shawn stopped, turning from embarrassment to anger. Maybe, Jared suddenly thought, they were the same thing. “Just leave me alone, Jared, okay? I don’t need you and your lame crap!”

His crap. He didn’t have any crap except... it was weird and stupid, but he couldn’t think of anything else. He said quietly, testing, “The stones?”

“I don’t know how you did that, but...just leave me alone!” Shawn hurried off.

So it had been the stones. And the stones had happened. They really

had. Only it had been some kind of freak accident, wind devil or some-thing, not any freaking magic.

“Forget you!” he yelled after Shawn, but Shawn was already on his board, skimming lightly out of Jared’s sight.

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WITH Kendall’s two hundred dollars, Jared bought a new deck, a deluxe Hawk, plus awesome trucks and wheels. He spent every day alone, in an-other neighborhood, painfully regaining his mobility and skill. After what happened with Shawn, he didn’t want to approach his other friends, and anyway he didn’t have too many other friends. Mostly it had been him and Shawn.

Ma’s boyfriend broke up with her, and Jared didn’t want to be home with her much; she was always wailing, or else out scoring. When the boyfriend’s food was gone, she barely bought more. Sometimes Jared’s stomach growled while he practiced, over and over, ollies and kickflips and fifty-fifty grinds and even a few hardflips. He sped around the neighbor-hood, a better one than his own, past trees turning from green to red and gold, past little kids on trikes, past bright flowers in beds edged with stones.

All the stones stayed where they were supposed to.

It was hunger and cold that finally made him pull out the card Dr. Kendall had given him at the clinic. Hunger, cold, and maybe loneliness, although he didn’t like to admit that. The address was not far away, on Carter Street. Jared skated over, preparing an excuse in his mind.

Kendall’s house wasn’t much, a small two-story—weren’t doctors supposed to make a lot of money? Neat bushes surrounded it, and the porch light shone cheerfully in the October dusk. Jared rang the bell and scowled.

“Hi, Doc, something’s wrong with my hand. You must not’ve fixed it right.”

“Come in, Jared,” Kendall said. Why did the guy always look so sad to see him? What a crock. But the house was warm and smelled of meat roast-ing. Jared’s mouth filled with sweet water. “Let me see your hand . . . you had slight damage to your left transverse ligament from the stones, but it looks all right now. Would you like to stay to dinner?”

“I already ate,” Jared said, scowling more deeply. His stomach growled.

“Then have a second dinner just to keep me company. My housekeeper just left, and she cooks a lot on Mondays so she doesn’t have to do much the rest of the week.” Kendall led the way to the tiny dining room without giving Jared a chance to answer, so he followed. The room had a big table, real curtains, a china chest filled with dishes. Kendall set a second place.

Roast beef and mashed potatoes and peas and a pudding that tasted of apples. Jared tried not to gobble too hard. When he finished, he glanced out the window. A cold rain fell. That sucked—it was too easy to snap a board in the rain, and, anyway, the wood got all soggy.

Kendall, who had been silent throughout dinner, said, “How about a game of Street Fighter?”

“You play Street Fighter? You? I know it’s an old game and everything, but . . . you?”

Kendall had a new Nintendo for the vintage game. He wielded the controllers pretty well for an old guy. Jared beat him, but only barely. As they played, Kendall said casually, “So how’s everything going?”

“Like what . . . got you!”

“Like, have you attempted any wizardry?”

“Cut the crap, man.”

“All right. How’s school?”

He said it in such a fake, prissy tone that Jared had to laugh. Then he didn’t. Throwing down the controller in midgame, abruptly he stood. “I gotta go.”

“School’s not going well?”

“Nothing’s going well, thanks to you guys,” Jared shouted, before he knew he was going to say anything at all. “Shawn won’t hang with me and the rest is just crap and—”

“Shawn is avoiding you?” Kendall said. “What about the other kids?”

“None of your business! Now let me outta here!”

“The door is that way,” Kendall said calmly. “And you’re welcome for dinner,” but Jared was already halfway out the front door, yanking up his collar against the rain, furious at . . . something.

Everything.

“Come back whenever you like,” Kendall called after him. “I’ve got Super Smash Brothers, too.”

* * * *

HE went back. The first time back, he planned on breaking in and stealing the Nintendo. But Kendall was there, so he didn’t, and they had dinner again, and played the Nintendo, and after that Jared didn’t pretend there was still something wrong with his hand. Pretty soon he was there nearly every night. During the day he skated if the weather was sunny, hung out aimlessly at the mall if it wasn’t, or watched TV at home if Ma wasn’t there. Kendall never mentioned wizard stuff again. The food was always good. After a few weeks, Jared started doing the dishes. Sometimes they played Nintendo; sometimes Jared watched TV while Kendall read. Jared wasn’t much of a reader. The house was warm.

At six thirty, they always had to stop and watch the news on TV. If there was an earthquake or a flood or a story about some farming problem, Kendall leaned forward intently, his hands on his knees.

On a cold night in November, when Jared knew the heat was off at home, he stayed the night in the guest room. At four A.M., with Kendall asleep, Jared prowled the house. Not to steal anything, just to look for . . . something.

In a drawer of the dining room china cabinet, under a pile of table-cloths, he found the picture. It was totally weird: a group of seventeen people who didn’t look like they belonged together. A heavy, middle-aged woman in brown stretch pants and a pink top. A man in a blue uniform with a square badge like a security guard. Two kids, seven or eight, who looked like twins, in miniature gang clothing. An old woman in some kind of long gown. A black man in a gray suit, holding a briefcase. A guy in one of those lame Hawaiian shirts, grinning like an idiot. An Asian kid holding an armful of books.

And Shawn.

Jared stared at the picture. It really was Shawn. But what was this group? It sure as hell wasn't Shawn's family.

"Would you like some coffee?"

Jared whirled around. Kendall stood in the doorway in some old-guy pajamas. He didn't look mad, just that sad-thing, which was getting really old.

"Who are these guys? Why is Shawn here?"

"I just put the water on, Jared. Come into the kitchen."

Jared stood beside the kitchen table, refusing to sit down, while Kendall pattered with teakettle and instant coffee. "I asked you a question—who are those people? Is that your dumb-ass 'Brotherhood'?"

"You remembered that I mentioned them," Kendall said with pleasure. "I didn't know if you would. You were still on painkillers."

"I'm not stupid, man!"

"I know you're not. And no, that's not the Brotherhood. That's the Other Side."

"Other side of *what*? Make sense!"

Kendall poured hot water into his cup, stirred it, and sat across the table. "Jared, didn't you think it odd that Shawn avoided you after your accident? Instead of thinking it rather cool that you could command rocks?"

"Rather cool," Jared mocked viciously. "'Command rocks.' C'mon, give me an answer! What's Shawn doing with those people?"

"He's one of them. And he had no idea you were a wizard, too, until the car hit you. And now he's staying away from you so you won't inadvertently discover what he is. You see, that's our main advantage over the Other Side. We know a lot more about them than they know about us."

"Us'? I thought you said you wasn't a wizard!"

“I’m not. But I work with them. Pain releases the power, remember. I’m a doctor. I see a lot of pain. Sometimes it brings us one of our own, sometimes one from the Other Side. My position at the Medical Center is how we’ve been able to identify so many of them.”

“I don’t believe any of this crap.”

“Fortunately, your believing or not believing does not change the reality.” Kendall sipped his coffee. “I wish belief was all it took to make the Other Side disappear.”

“‘The Other Side.’ Give me a break. And what are they supposed to be doing that’s so bad? What you got against Shawn? You think he’s going to set off a bomb or something?”

“I already told you, magic doesn’t operate in the presence of metal, which bombs require. Magic is considerably older than that. It belongs to the sphere of nature, of grass and wind and animals and plants. And rocks, the oldest of all nature.”

“Right. Sure. So Shawn’s gonna mess up the world by growing the wrong grass? Get real!”

Abruptly Kendall leaned forward. “*You* get real, Jared. Your ignorance is appalling—what are they teaching you in that school? Yes, the Other Side might ‘mess up the world’ by growing the wrong grass, if there’s profit in it. Money or power profit. Don’t you know that there’s money to be made from drought, from famine, from hurricanes, from killer bees, from mutated plants? There’s always money to be made in disasters. You cause them, then you charge heavily to clean them up, as just one example. You’re poised and ready with whatever is needed, because you know ex-actly when and where the disaster will occur. And no one ever suspects you caused it, because hurricanes and volcanoes and droughts and invasive plant species are all *completely natural*. Plus, no one in the developed coun-tries, where money flows like green water, even believes in magic anyway. Now do you get it?”

“No,” Jared shouted. “You telling me Shawn is rich from this magic? Man, he don’t even have a decent deck!”

“No, because riches now would draw attention to the Other Side. And it takes a lot of international coordination to pull off a big profit from a major disaster. They’ve already managed a couple of small ones—did you read in

the paper about that unexpected flood, along the Big Thompson River in Colorado? No, of course you didn't, you don't read the papers. But we think that flood was one of theirs. We're still organizing, too. One day Shawn will be very rich, and very powerful, although most of the world will never know how he did it. The FBI will assume drugs and spend futile years trying to prove it."

"So now you can see the future, too!"

"No, of course not, I just—"

"You're just full of crap! You're crazy, man, you know that? The biggest loser ever, and this sucks!" Jared jerked at the locks on the kitchen door, yanked it open, and bolted outside.

"Jared . . . wait. . . don't—"

He was already gone, skimming along the cold sidewalk in the dark.

The man was more than crazy, he was totally gone. Psycho. Loony-bin. Jared was never going back there.

Where else was he going to go?

Jared shivered. Last evening's rain had stopped, but it was really cold out. His hoodie wasn't enough for this weather. He had to move faster, stay warm, get home.

Home. The heatless apartment where Ma and her new boyfriend would be sleeping under all the blankets, including Jared's, or—worse—up fight-ing, strung out on crystal. And getting home alone, this time of almost morning when only the gangbangers were out on the streets . . .

He stopped under a streetlight. For one terrible minute, he thought he might cry.

Bag that. And bag all the psycho stuff Kendall had been telling him, too. The old man had been kind to him. So what if he was crazy? He wasn't dangerous, and it wasn't like Jared hadn't dealt with worse. He could deal with anything he had to. And Kendall's place was warm, and had food.

Why *had* Shawn reacted so weird to Jared's accident?

He spun his board around and skated back to Kendall's, thinking hard.

The back door to Kendall's house still stood wide open. In the kitchen, the chairs were knocked over, and Kendall's coffee sloshed all over the floor. Blood smeared the table. Jared searched the whole house; Kendall was gone.

He found a flashlight in a kitchen drawer and took it outside. Fresh tire marks slashed across a corner of the soggy lawn. They led down Carter Street—but where after that?

He should call the cops.

Oh, like cops would believe in the kidnapping. If an adult went miss-ing, they wouldn't even start looking for him for a couple of days. And they certainly wouldn't believe Jared, who had a bunch of citations, unpaid, for illegal skating at the Civic Center and the library.

It was only after he thought all this that Jared saw what it meant: that *he* believed Kendall had been kidnapped, and by the so-called "Other Side." The second he realized this, he started shaking. *Cold*, he thought. It was just the cold. Just the cold.

In the dark he skated to one end of the block, peered down it. Nothing. The other end of the block—also nothing.

No one else had been as good to him as Kendall had. Nobody, not ever.

There was no way to know which way the psychos had taken Kendall. No real way. Unless . . .

Jared looked around with his flashlight. The house next door to Kendall had a flower bed edged with stones. Feeling like the biggest lame-brain in the whole crappy world, Jared picked up three of the rocks and thought, *Which way?*

Nothing happened, so he said it out loud: "Which way?"

Nothing happened.

He stepped away from his deck, with its metal trucks, and tried again. Nothing.

His hoodie had a metal zipper so, shivering, he took it off and laid it

on top of the deck, twenty feet away. “Which way, you psycho stones?”

Nothing.

His jeans had a metal zipper and studs. “No way,” Jared said aloud, but a second later, shivering, he stripped them off and put them on top of his hoodie. In his underwear, shoes and socks, and T-shirt, he scanned the street. Nobody there—it was four thirty in the morning. He picked up the rocks again. “Which way, you little bastards?”

The rocks grew warm in his hand.

Jared shrieked and dropped them. A sharp pain shot through his wrist, gone in a moment. The stones fell in a straight line toward the north end of Carter Street. Jared stared, disbelieving. He did it again, this time facing south. The rocks got warm, he dropped them, and they swirled around his body to form a line going north. The sharp pain hit his wrist.

He closed his eyes. No way. *This psycho stuff doesn't happen.* All at once he would have given anything, anything in the entire world, to be back skating at the Civic Center with Shawn, ollieing off the steps and trying to do grinds down the rail, trying to land a 540 flip.

Instead, he picked up his clothing and the three rocks, got on his deck, and skated north.

At the next intersection, he again walked away from the board and jeans and hoodie, and said, “Which way?” The rocks pointed east.

Two more turns and he was glad to see the interstate, no turns off it for a long ways. His wrist throbbed from the repeated flashes of pain. Jared put his jeans and hoodie back on. His legs felt like ice—not a good way to skate. But he wasn't going to do any tricks, just straight skating, and the speed would warm him. He skated up the on-ramp, then along the highway, dodging the trucks that blatted angry horns at him, keeping a sharp eye out for cops.

At the first exit, he got off the highway and did the stones thing. They told him to get back on. Jared glanced at the sky, worried; already it was starting to get red in the east. He put on his clothes and skated back onto the highway. His stomach grumbled and he cursed at it, at Kendall, at the world.

At the next exit, the stones told him to follow a deserted stretch of

country road. Jared noted its name: County Line Road.

The house wasn't far, fortunately: the third house, set back in the woods. A white van with muddy tires sat in the driveway. The van said MCCLELLAN SECURITY. Jared remembered the man in the blue uniform in the picture.

He crept up to the house. All the curtains were shut and the basement windows painted black, but when he put his ear to the grimy glass, Jared could hear noises in the basement.

A thud. A groan. Then, "Once more, Doctor—all the names, please. Now. This is getting boring."

Silence. Then Kendall screamed.

They were torturing him to get the Brotherhood names! Including Jared's name. "*You see, that's our main advantage over the Other Side. We know a lot more about them than they know about us.*" That's what Kendall had said. But now—

No, not Jared's name. They already had Jared's name, thanks to Shawn. And if Jared had stayed five minutes longer at Kendall's house, they'd have had him down in that basement, too.

He could skate away. Get back on the highway, never go home again, go...where?

Kendall screamed again.

A rage filled Jared. He thought he'd been angry before—at Shawn, at his mother, at the cops, at the crap that happened and went on happening and never seemed to stop. But it hadn't been anger like this. This was the mother of angers, the huge one, the serious-hang-time-in-orbit of anger.

Woods bordered the back of the house. Jared thrashed a little way into them, shoved his deck under some bushes, added his jeans and hoodie. Then he stood there, twigs scratching his bare legs and some kind of insects biting at his face, and closed his eyes. He pictured rocks. All kinds of rocks, all sizes, pointy and smooth and rough, smashing through the black-painted basement windows and into the heads of every single bastard down there except Kendall. He pictured the blood and the wounds and the—

Jared screamed. Pain tore through his whole body, dropping him into the bushes. His arms and legs were on fire, he was going to die, he would never skate again—

The pain vanished, leaving him gasping. He staggered to his feet, just in time to see the rocks homing in on the house, flying in from every direction like fighter jets on some video game, but real and solid as Jared himself. All the painted windows smashed, and Jared heard yells and screams from the house. Then silence.

It couldn't have happened.

It did happen.

He struggled out of the bushes and ran to the front door. It was locked, and so was the back door. Finally, he ran to the closest busted window, knocked out the glass still stuck around the edges, and slid into the basement, careful to land on his sneakers amid the shards and splinters of glass.

Two men and a woman lay bleeding on the floor, covered with stones. Kendall was tied to a chair, gaping at him. The old man had a gash on his forehead and serious blood on the arm of his pajamas. Jared picked up the knife somebody had dropped and cut Kendall's ropes. He doubled over, gasping, and Jared was afraid Kendall was having a heart attack or some-thing. But then he straightened and staggered to his feet.

"Jared ... I'm all...right ..."

"Sure you are. Never better, right? C'mon." Jared helped him up the stairs, but then didn't know what to do next.

Kendall did. He gasped, "Go back downstairs and get a cell phone from anybody who has one. Be careful—they're not dead. Don't kill any-body, Jared—we don't want a murder investigation. Then come back up here and lock the door at the top of the stairs."

Jared did as he was told, a sudden sick feeling in his stomach. It fought with a feeling of unreality—*this can't be happening*—that only got stronger when he again saw all the stones lying around the basement.

He'd done that. Him, Jared Stoffel.

Kendall called somebody on the cell, said, "Code blue. The address

is ...” and looked at Jared. Jared gave it to him. They only had to wait a few minutes before a car screeched up and they went out to meet it. A silver Mercedes S, at least seventy grand. Jared blinked. A pretty black girl jumped out. She had on a school uniform like rich girls wore, green skirt and jacket and a little green tie on a white blouse. Ordinarily Jared hated kids like that, rich snobs, but now was different.

“He did it?” she said, talking to Kendall but staring at Jared, her eyes wide. “How did—”

“I don’t know yet,” Kendall said. “How much—”

“I hadn’t yet told them anything. But I would have, Denise.” She nodded, grimaced, and tenderly helped Kendall into the car, apparently not caring that he got blood on the leather seat. Jared climbed into the back. Denise must be old enough to drive, he figured, but she didn’t look it. Was the Mercedes hers, or her family’s, or maybe stolen?

She pulled the car onto the road and accelerated hard. Over her shoulder Denise threw Jared a glance at once respectful and a little scared. He sat up straighter in the backseat. She said, “Stones?”

“Yeah,” Jared said.

“We don’t have anybody that can do stone.”

He liked the tone of her voice. It let him say, “What do you do?”

“Wind. But strictly small-time. You’re *gifted*, dude.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet. You should see me skate.”

In the front seat, one arm cradled carefully in the other, Kendall smiled.

* * * *

“NO,” Larson said. “Absolutely not.” He wore his do-rag again and it looked, Jared thought, just as dumb as the first time. Larson himself looked furious.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” said the older woman in a business suit. Probably she’d been getting dressed for work when they pulled up, just like Denise had been getting ready for school. This house must be the woman’s—it looked like something a business lady would have, nice but

really boring. Light brown rugs, brown furniture, tan curtains. The lady acted like she was in charge. Trouble was, Larson acted in charge, too. Jared thought they'd square off for a fight, but things didn't work like that around here.

"We do have a choice, Anna," Larson said. That was her name—Anna. "There's a number of cities we could send them to."

Jared said sharply, "Send? You mean me and the doc? Nobody's sending me no place!"

Anna said, "I'm afraid we have to, Jared. The Other Side now knows about both of you. They'll eliminate you if they can, and we might not be able to protect you."

"Oh, right. You can't just put a spell around my house or something? No? I guess you're not real wizards after all!"

A voice behind him said, "I'm afraid it doesn't work that way," and Jared spun around. Denise, back from parking the car someplace. If he'd known she was coming back, he wouldn't have sounded so snotty.

She said to Jared, "I can do wind magic, and Anna can communicate with wild animals, and so on, but only when we're present at the scene, Jared. There's no such thing as a spell that can just be left in place to guard someone. I wish there was."

If anybody else had explained it like that to Jared, he wouldn't have felt so stupid now. Kendall was off in a back room of this house, getting patched up or something. Jared crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "I can't just leave and, like, move to some other city! I've got Ma and school and crap!"

Larson said brutally, "If you don't go, you're dead. And some of us, the ones you can identify, will be with you."

"But my ma—"

"Will be told that you've been taken away from her by Child Protective Services. She'll believe that."

Jared felt hot blood rush into his face. So Larson knew all about his mother! Furious and embarrassed, he turned to slam out of the room, but Denise blocked the doorway.

Larson said, "We don't need to send him to Tellerton. Send him somewhere else, to a nonactive cell. We don't need a kid this angry in the very center of the Brotherhood."

"I disagree," Anna said.

"No one will be able to control him. He'll endanger everybody there."

"I won't endanger nobody I don't want to!" Jared said.

Anna said, "I think that's true, Larson. And Nick will be with him."

Denise, still standing in the doorway, spoke in a low voice that only Jared could hear. "I know it's hard to be sent away. But Anna's right—you'll have Dr. Kendall with you. And the place you're going ... I know for a fact that it has an awesome skate park."

"It does?"

"The best."

He blurted, "Will you come there to see me skate?" and instantly hated himself. She was too old for him, she would think he was a little kid, she'd shame him in front of Larson—

"Sure. I think that one way or another, we'll end up working together, anyway. Things are going to get much more serious soon, we'll need every wizard we can get, and we don't have a good stone man. You're really talented."

That was the second time she'd said that. Jared turned back to Anna, ignoring Larson. "Okay. I'll go. Where is this Tellerton?"

"In Virginia."

Jared blinked. "I—"

"Zack will drive you both down there this afternoon. The sooner you get out, the better."

"My stuff! I have—"

"It has to stay here. They'll get you new belongings in Tellerton. Don't

worry, Jared, you're one of us now." Anna left. Larson said, "Wait a minute, Anna, I want to talk more with you about the hurricane." He strode after her.

Jared was left alone with Denise. He blinked, scowled, and said, to say something, "What hurricane?"

"It was on the early-morning news," Denise said somberly. "A big hurricane suddenly changed direction and came ashore in Florida, and the hurricane season is supposed to be over. Eight people dead so far. At least one big warehouse was destroyed that we found out had just been bought by the Other Side. Now they'll file all kinds of insurance claims on the stuff in-side. Anna, one of our lawyers, just tracked the purchase and the ware-house insurance yesterday, but she hasn't had time to follow through."

Jared tried to understand. Denise was smart; all these people were smart. And wizard stuff seemed to involve nonmagic things like insurance claims, which Jared had never thought about. But one thing was clear to him, the part about eight people dead. So far.

He said, "They'd really do that? Kill, like, innocent people just to make money?"

"They would. They do."

He felt a little dizzy. Too much stuff, too fast. Wizards and magic and moving away and stones . . . He could still feel the rocks warm in his hands, ready to tell him things. Him, Jared Stoffel, who nobody except Shawn ever told anything.

And Shawn . . . the so-called friend he'd trusted like a brother . . .

"Shawn is gonna pay," he said to Denise.

"Yes," Denise said, and *that* was what decided him. No lame bull about not being into revenge, or calming himself down, or being too angry a kid to be useful. Just: Yes. She understood him.

All at once, Jared felt like he'd just ollied off a twelve-set and was doing serious hang time in the air.

A wizard. He was a wizard. He didn't want to be, but he was. A stone man. And everything was different now.

Maybe that was a good thing.

He could learn about insurance claims or whatever. He wasn't dumb. He had learned to do a Back-180 down a four-set; he could learn what he needed to. He could.

"Welcome to the Brotherhood, Jared," Denise said softly.

"Thanks," Jared said.

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