

PROLOGUE

THAT WAS THEN

MIDDLETON.THEN.

DANNY WAS THE last to arrive, as usual. He pulled up to Eric's house in the new Beemer he bought to replace the ElectriCar.

Eric went out to greet him in the driveway. He hadn't been sure Danny would make it. Not because he thought Danny was scared — Danny didn't get scared, not that Eric had ever seen. But he was the one still insisting there must be some kind of rational explanation, hanging onto his skepticism like it was a cross that might keep a vampire at bay.

(That didn't always work, though. Eric knew from experience.)

So maybe Danny did get scared, after all.

Now he was here, unloading stuff from the Beemer's trunk as if there'd never been any doubt he'd show. Eric helped him carry the duffel bag inside. Eric's mom was spending the holidays with her new boyfriend at a crystal healing retreat in Sedona (she'd told Eric it was her Christmas gift to herself).

The girls were in the living room. Alana was wrapping her fists in long, leather cords, carefully fitting the iron spikes of her cestus over her knuckles. Carrie was strapping herself into a bulletproof vest, stolen from a locker at the station. They didn't have any women's sizes, so she looked like Eddie Murphy wearing his fat suit in *The Nutty Professor*.

Eric dropped Danny's bag on the floor.

"Careful with that," he snapped.

“Sorry. What is it?” Eric said.

Danny unzipped it and began assembling something out of the components inside, his movements quick and sure. “Dangerous,” he said. “I’d like to avoid anything exploding before we actually want it to explode.”

Carrie stepped over to take a closer look. “Seriously, what is it?”

Danny attached a pistol grip to a long barrel, then slapped in a battery pack.

“We know light hurts them, right? I figured a burst of coherent light should be enough to scatter them completely, just like a real shadow. So I pulled apart one of the industrial lasers in the lab and mounted it to a — ”

“Jesus Christ, Danny, are you saying you built a *ray gun*?” Carrie asked.

He gave them his usual look, as if he was gazing down from the great height of his mountainous IQ. “No,” he said, insulted. “It’s a PEW. A Plasma Emitter Weapon. It pushes light through a series of ruby crystal diodes to exponentially increase the output of — ”

He stopped when he saw the looks on their faces.

“Fine. It’s a ray gun.”

Eric looked at it, frowning. “What does it... do?”

Danny hefted the device and pointed it at the ceiling. “Hopefully, burn those things into oblivion.”

“No, I got that,” Eric said. “What does it do if it hits any people?”

Danny shrugged. “Should carbonize skin and bone at about ninety feet.”

“Jesus *Christ*, Danny,” Carrie said.

Danny scowled at her. “Does that thing shoot Nerf darts?” he asked, pointing to the holster on her waist.

Carrie put her hand on the butt of the gun. She had her father’s back-up weapon, a .44 Ruger Police Special. As far as he knew, it was locked away in his gun safe. But she saw him enter the combination when she was six years old. She remembered. Carrie didn’t forget anything. Ever.

Now Carrie felt the gun, heavy and solid, weighing her down

like an anchor. Even with everything that had happened so far, the gun was what made it all real. They were going to go out there tonight. They were going to fight. And they were probably going to die.

But first, they were going to kill some things, and some of those things would be wearing the faces of people they knew. There would be blood, and pain, and no matter what else happened, they would be responsible for it. All of them.

So instead of answering him, she asked, “Are we ready to go?”

“Ready,” Alana said, her hand lightly on the hilt of her sword, which was strapped to her side. They’d never seen her in full battle gear before. For a moment, they were all struck dumb. In her armor, with her weapons, she looked magnificent. She practically shone with her own light.

She put a heavy coat over it all, and they managed to stop staring.

“Here,” Danny said. He took out little devices about the size of a deck of cards. Each one had a glass screen on the front. He showed them how to turn it on, and each screen lit up with rows of symbols.

“Personal communicators,” he said. “They use cell-phone signals, but they have cameras and computers inside as well. We can send pictures or video or text to one another if we have to. We can use these to keep in touch.”

Danny showed them how to tap each little symbol — the communicators had a touch-screen instead of a keypad — to make everything work.

“Cool,” Eric said. “When does Sharp Industries release these to the public?”

Danny made a face. “Never. My dad said nobody’s going to pay a thousand dollars for a cell phone. He hated the idea.”

All of them caught the past tense. None of them knew what to say.

Carrie broke the silence. “Well then,” she said. “I guess it’s time.”

Eric snapped his fingers, and a brilliant ball of light exploded in the air. This was the big show now. He had to be perfect. There were no second chances. Not tonight.

Danny hefted his not-a-ray-gun. Alana had her sword. Carrie

put her coat on over her holster and the vest.

They were as ready as they would ever be. There was no sense putting it off any longer. They opened the front door. For a moment, they paused and stood on the threshold.

The boy genius, the girl detective, the young magician, and the warrior princess.

The street was empty. The streetlights seemed to be clouded, muddled by some extra layer of darkness. The few remaining drifts of snow were dirty, almost black. A bitterly cold wind picked up, and they all shivered.

The End waited out there for them. They could feel it.

Despite everything they had been through, everything they'd already done in their lives, they were scared. None of them had to say it.

Carrie took Danny's hand, and he let her. Eric and Alana tried not to look, but for them, this was shockingly public behavior, as if they'd started kissing and tearing each other's clothes off right there.

For one wild moment, they all had the same idea. What if they went back inside? What if they pretended none of it was real? What would happen if they just *stayed home*?

Then a car went past, filled with some of their classmates, all dressed for the Party Like It's 1999 Dance. They had the stereo up and the windows down. They didn't notice the murk filling the air. One of them threw a bottle out the window and it smashed against the curb, which everyone inside the car seemed to find hilarious. The driver stomped on the gas, and they barely missed a mailbox as they roared out of the neighborhood.

It seemed even quieter once the car was gone.

Eric couldn't take the silence anymore. "Alana, I hear Mike Fuller is still looking for a date. You could be underneath him in a couple of hours if you want."

"At least I can get a date," Alana said. "Your big Saturday night is a box of tissues and a bottle of lotion."

Carrie rolled her eyes, dropped Danny's hand. "Hey. Will and Grace. Are we doing this or what?"

They looked at one another, then sort of shrugged and shuffled their feet. Even Danny smiled. Because he knew, like they all did,

that they didn't really have a choice.

Eric closed the door behind them, and they walked out into the night.

Some kids got to go to dances and go to parties and make out and sneak their parents' booze. Some kids got to stay home, where it was warm and safe. Some kids got to grow up.

While other kids went out to face the things that waited in the dark.