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Gossom Switch and The Zearn Master

Donna Gossom Thomas
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GOSSOM SWITCH
AND
THE ZEARN MASTER

by

DONNA GOSSOM THOMAS

KERRY MADDEN, COMMITTEE CHAIR
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LARRY WHARTON
JACQUELINE WOOD

THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2011

GOSSOM SWITCH
AND
THE ZEARN MASTER

DONNA GOSSOM THOMAS

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Gossom Switch is a creative nonfiction piece which traces my paternal roots. This narrative explores the family bond, racial segregation, slavery, and civil rights. Although *Gossom Switch* is a personal journey, my story is also universal and historical.

The Zearn Master is a middle-grade fiction novel. While the main purpose of this novel is to entertain, like my creative nonfiction it focuses on family, especially the bond between siblings. This piece is also universal in that it centers around the sport of basketball.

Keywords: fiction, creative nonfiction, middle-grade, basketball, slavery, freedom

DEDICATION

To my mother, Catherine Gossom, I think I am becoming the woman you always knew I could be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kerry Madden is one of the most giving people I have ever met. For her faith in my writing, her guidance, and her patience, I will forever be grateful.

To my first creative writing professor, Larry Wharton, thank you for encouraging me to continue my quest to be a writer—thank you to Sue Kim for her edits and enthusiasm and to Jacqueline Wood for serving on my committee.

To my father, Tom Gossom, thank you for your storytelling. Your words inspired me to capture our family's history.

Special thanks to my children, Tippi and Emmett, you guys are my lifework. Thanks for being my strength.

To my sister, Kim Brown, and my cousin, Shirley Long, thanks for your memories and unselfish support.

You have each helped me to fulfill a lifelong dream. May God shine His light upon you all.

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SECTION I: GOSSOM SWITCH

CHAPTER ONE

2005

There are millions of African Americans out there whose inventions and whose land never saw the purses of their descendants.

I opened my car window and let the brisk breath of the fall evening touch my face. There were little stings of coolness which I knew were only a prelude to what lay ahead: low expectations mixed with polite condescension. I was meeting my sister in the parking lot of Brookwood Mall, an upscale shopping complex sandwiched between the upscale neighborhoods of Mountain Brook and Homewood in Birmingham, Alabama. We would ride the two miles to Jonathan Smith's office together. My gut knew he would disappoint us. I had come to accept that, but my thoughts were with my father. What I was dreading most was looking into his face. I knew he would be disappointed. This was the sixth attempt in the last fifteen years to regain hundreds of acres of land my great-grandfather once owned in Elmore County, Alabama. I had no faith that it was going to be favorable.

I looked up to see my sister walking toward the car. Her brown hair fell in perfect strands that caressed her oval face. She wore loose, baggy pants that looked chic, and I wore a dark, full skirt that could be called fashionable but nothing more. That was us,

chic and fashionable. Nevertheless, we formed a bond which would take the wildest chaos to break.

“Have you talked to Daddy?” Kim asked as she cleared the latest Terry McMillan book from the passenger side of my Volvo.

“No, you.”

“Yeah, you know he’s coming with Shirley.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You brought a notepad?”

“Yeah, I want to make sure to write down everything he says.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Kim said. She strapped herself in the seat belt, fumbled in her purse for a few seconds, bringing out a pen and small notepad. Then she applied a clear gloss to her lips. When her fidgeting could no longer distract her curiosity, she asked.

“What do you think?” I knew she was hoping I would give her some optimism.

“I think he is going to slyly suggest to us that we drop the case,” I let her down.

“Think positive.”

“OK.”

“Donna, that doesn’t sound very convincing.

“I know.”

“I just hate it for Daddy.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We drove the fifteen minutes to Jonathan Smith’s Homewood office in silence. The sun retreated peacefully into the azure sky, but the jumbled thoughts in my head could not find peace. Where would we go next? Will there be a next? What does disappointment look like on the face of an eighty-year-old man?

“What are you thinking about?” My sister asked.

“Nothing.” I wasn’t ready to share.

Jonathan was working this case as a favor to my brother. They had gone to John Carroll Catholic High School together in the sixties when academic integration was new to the city of Birmingham. Thomas, my brother, is African American and Jonathan is Caucasian. They have remained friends throughout the years. However, what started as a true friendship of racial blindness, through the wears and tears of life, had become an I’ll-do-for-you-as-long-as-it’s-beneficial-to-me friendship. I had little faith in him. I never felt he was in it for the long haul. This was an inconvenient case at an inconvenient time. He was preparing to run for mayor of Birmingham, and this case was not promising enough to detour that journey.

We arrived at the same time as my cousin Shirley and our father, Tom. Shirley, my father’s favorite niece, lived around the corner from him. She was always willing to bring him to family meetings since Kim and I lived 20 miles south of Norwood, in Hoover, Alabama. Shirley had lost her father years ago, and her mother succumbed to

cancer in 2002, two years after our mother also died from the dreaded disease. Since we now understood the loss of maternal support, death made our already sisterly bond tighter.

I avoided Daddy's eyes. His hopes were not high, but his heart was aching for righteousness. He knew this would probably be the last attempt. He also knew without a dedicated lawyer, reclamation would not work. Daddy's dark, green pants sagged, and his shirt was slightly wrinkled, not from lack of ironing but from wearing it over and over which he did with most of his clothes since mama's death. Over the years his chocolate face had taken over the pink of his lips and the white of his sclera. He smiled when he saw his two girls. We have been his rock since mother left us.

"Hey, there, Donna and Kim," Daddy said. He always called us by our first names.

"Daddy couldn't you iron your shirt?" Kim scolded. She was always straightforward with Daddy. I was more subtle. I would have said, "Don't wear that shirt again, Daddy. It needs ironing."

"He'll get it right next time," Shirley said as she bent her long legs to hug Kim and me.

It was after six p.m. The perfect time to usher us in, complain about the long day he had, and usher us out. The building was quiet, which made the clacking of our heels seem as if they were attacking the hardwood steps ascending to Smith's office. He met us at the top of the stairs and escorted us into a small, cluttered conference room. He apologized for the mess and disappeared for a few minutes giving us time to assess the

situation. Was this clutter a sign of what he thought of our case or what he thought of us? I remember the young Bubby, Jonathan's childhood nickname. I could see him coming through the front door of our small home smiling and joking with my brother and giving genuine colorless smiles to my mother and father. He ignored me just as my brother did. And today, over thirty years later, he still ignored me. He never acknowledged that we knew each other in another era, and neither do I. Shirley mentioned that she had heard the announcement of his candidacy. We all nodded indicating we had seen the same newscast. Shirley said aloud what we all spoke in silence. "Well, he won't be devoting much time to this case."

When Smith returned, he apologized for the clutter and excused it by saying this was a new office location. His stature was quiet and soft, not domineering or even imposing. In a different profession he may have been considered sympathetic. He addressed each of us by our first names, except for Daddy whom he addressed as Mr. Gossom. He did not pause when he changed the subject.

"The trial is set for February, but we have no evidence to suggest the land was purchased illegally. It would take years and a lot of money to research records dating back into the 1800's. What we do have indicates that Thomas Jefferson Gossom willingly sold this parcel of land, and he willingly signed all the documents."

His curly, burnt-blond hair was clipped short around his face. This was a great contrast from the sun-lit blond curls that bounced with naivety in his younger years. His hazel eyes did not acknowledge anyone except Daddy. His beige lips were smooth in their defeatist delivery.

“By the time we search the records, the trial will be upon us. I don’t think we will find anything different from what’s already here. Thomas did sell a lot of the land legally, and there are document to prove that. I can ask for an extension, but I don’t think we will have any more information. Mr. Gossom, I know you say signatures were forged, but we have no proof of that.”

“Well, I know my papa’s signature was forged because he never signed anything giving away his share of the land. Shit, we were poor as dirt rats. So, I know papa had no money.”

He listened to my father out of respect but with no sign of being convinced our plight would be successful. He answered all of our questions; however, he was eager to point out the lack of hope. He continued to remind us that via an earlier phone conversation, which none of us participated in including my father, my brother agreed with him. Like that was supposed to make everything OK. Well, it didn’t.

“What I don’t understand is that if all of this is legal, why did the plaintiff get a lawyer and serve us with papers to dispute this land? If they have all the documents and they are all legal, why are we even involved?” I asked.

“Evidently, they were not sure at first. However, after talking with their lawyer and looking at the recent evidence, I just don’t see a different resolution. But I am willing to pursue it further, if you want that.” He said looking at Daddy.

“Can we postpone the trial and do more research?” Shirley asked forcing Smith to give her the respect of eye contact.

“We can. However, the cost of hiring someone to do a title search dating back to the 1800’s would be enormous.”

“What’s enormous? Give us a figure.” Kim asked, demanding her respect also.

“Due to the complexity of the search, I would say anywhere from ten to twenty-five thousand dollars.”

This he knew was out of our ballpark.

Defeat made us all ease back into our chairs and exhale frustration. I wanted to fight. I wanted to fight with everything in me. I wanted to walk the path where my great grandfather had walked and whisper to the open air that we had found our way back to the legacy he left for us.

I wanted to watch my father smile as he closed the chapter to a book that was begging for a happy ending. But I knew money was the deterrent to finishing the last chapter.

“Do you want to pursue this, Mr. Gossom?”

“No, this is the last time for me. I’m just tired. It’s a shame how people just took Grand Papa’s land.”

My father, the eighty-year-old man, was disappointed. Disappointment looked like a curdled, black, lump of manure that still had the footprints of the people who had stumped upon it over and over again.

When we left lawyer Smith’s office, we all knew this would be the resolution. Still dejection found its way into our faces. I really didn’t blame him because we were

easy. We had no faith. What made us different from any other African American family that had been duped out of their rightful inheritance? There are millions of African Americans out there whose inventions and whose land never saw the purses of their descendants. It was stolen, whether with forged signatures or illiterate ancestors signing documents that they could not read. By the time you wormed through the lies, records, historians, more lies, the days would accumulate to years and money that no one in this family had or at least would admit to having.

“This isn’t the first time. Every time we start this it seems the lawyer sell us out,” Daddy starts.

“Daddy you can’t say that,” Kim said.

“Well, every time we get a lawyer and he goes down to Wetumpka and search around, he comes back and says we should give up. But before he goes the lawyer is all gung ho about the case. I think someone is paying them to go away. You know they say the local energy company obtained some of the land through false records, and you know they don’t want to be implicated in this mess.”

We looked at each other as if to say here he goes again. I decided to take Daddy home, letting Kim and Shirley off the hook. On the ride home Daddy started retelling me the Gossom story. He started with my great-great grandparents, Alonza and Katie. Daddy’s words made me a believer. His stories made me believe that we were rightful heirs to what once was a dynasty. I had always been fascinated with the story of Thomas Jefferson Gossom, my great grandfather. I cannot explain why the story pushed me harder than my brother or sister. But I wanted more. As a young child all I ever studied in

school was the inhumanity of slavery. According to the schoolbooks, all Negroes were slaves. They were property to be sold and bartered. They were ignorant and uneducated; therefore, they were incapable of owning property, building an empire and raising a family. So, how did my great grandfather do it? My mind questioned the one-sided view of my childhood history books. So, I listened to my father as I had done many years before wondering what Thomas Jefferson Gossom would think of us. Should we give up? Let it be. It's so easy when money is the factor that makes people work hard for you or hardly work for you.

“It just makes me sick every time I think about it. Papa owned almost all of Elmore County. There is a whole section down there called “Gossom Switch.””

CHAPTER TWO

1851-1861

In the cotton fields especially during the Virginia summers, the sun made no preference to skin color. It baked mulatto, black, brown, and white skin all the same.

For a while he thought he was different. His mulatto skin made him think so. His tight curls made him think so, and the fact that he was Massa's son made him think so. He was allowed to work in the big house alongside his mother on the Gossom Plantation. He even played with Massa Gossom's white children. He was especially fond of his half-brother, Tom. Except for Tom's straight, blonde hair there was very little difference in the boys. At age six their young bodies were already tall and lean. Their faces were round with a broad nose and full lips. They played whenever Alonzo had a minute from his duties. They raced each other from the cotton fields to the big house. They hid under the wooden kitchen table and jumped out when Alonzo's mother, Flo, came inside from collecting wood for the stove. Everything seemed inclusive to Alonzo until one day he let the words "my brother" roll off his tongue. His mother snatched him with a force that made his head boggle.

"Boy don't ya ever say dat. He ain't never gon be yo brother. You's a slave, and he is yo Massa Tom. That's how it is and how it gon always be."

At age seven when Massa grew tired of his mother, Alonzo fully understood her words. Massa Gossom bought a new slave girl to run the house, and Alonzo and his

mother were sent to the cotton fields. At first they were treated with cold indifference. Field slaves had a bond that did not include house slaves. But Alonza was a quick learner and a pleasant child. He smiled, and he understood that his playtime with Tom was associated with the setting of the sun. It wasn't long before the other slaves included Alonza and his mother in their circle. Flo tried to explain to her son why they were no longer in the house, and why he had little time to play with Tom.

“Alonza, you’s learn early that you is a slave child. Slaves have no rights. You take what you git, sometimes good, sometimes bad.” She did not believe in hope. To her hope was a slave’s cruelest enemy.

“But Tom says that I’m different, Mama.”

“Yo head hard, Alonza, like yo pappa. One day you’s know you’s black and he’s white.”

Alonza worked alongside his mother in the cotton fields. It wasn't long before he mastered the art of balancing the cotton bag between the blades of his back. He knew how to quickly snatch a cotton ball from its pocket without nipping his fingertips. Days ran into weeks, which ran into months, which spilled into years. He was now fifteen and well on his way to being over six feet tall. The years had taken away the playful boy and replaced them with a man-child.

After a long day in the fields, Alonza walked back to the cabin he shared with his mother. In the distance he could see Tom standing in front of the tiny quarters. Tom was his older brother only by three months. Where Alonza had grown with the bulk and brawn to fill his height, Tom was scrawny, lanky and awkward with his. Alonza loved his brother, and for a long time he was sure that love was returned.

“Hey Alonza, pick up a rock and come on now. I know I’m going to beat you this time.” Tom yelled.

Some of the other slaves started to gather around the tiny slave quarters. They joked with Tom out of duty. Most of them could not stand the spoiled son of their massa. His white skin made him untrustworthy.

Alonza picked up the rock and smiled at his brother.

“A rock is not going to help you,” Alonza replied.

Jennie Bee, a fourteen-year-old orphaned slave, with full breasts and plump hips smiled at Alonza and burst through the door of the cabin he shared with his mother. Flo rolled her eyes when she saw the young girl rush into the room and moved to the opposite side of the cabin without saying a word.

“I know I got you this time, Alonza.” Tom said.

“Never.”

“You first, brother.”

Alonza entered the cabin with Tom following close behind. The slaves piled outside of the opened door and waited for the word. Jennie Bee stood on a stool holding a long narrow stick well over six feet tall. She beckoned for Alonza to come forward. Alonza pressed his body against the wall while everyone waited for Jennie Bee to speak.

“Six and two,” Jennie Bee yelled and scratched the wall with the rock. The slave standing closest to the doorway yelled, “Six and two.” Cheers raced through the crowd of slaves gathered outside the door.

“All right my turn,” Tom said.

Tom came forward and pressed his body against the wall. Jennie Bee looked twice before she yelled. "Six and one." Alonza jumped for joy, as did all the other slaves.

"I'll get you next time," Tom said and stormed out of the cabin.

To the world this was an insignificant victory, but to the slaves of the Gossom plantation it was a major triumph. The slaves celebrated into the night.

During the celebration Alonza managed to catch the eyes of Jennie Bee. Her eyes were smiling only at him. And he liked that. He managed to get her away from the crowd. They walked into a small patch of woods. His hand left hers, traveled the length of her arm, and came to rest on her pointed chin. He pulled her forward and pressed his lips against the soft pale tissue that covered her mouth. It was at that moment they both knew they belonged to each other.

"Alonza, you didn't tell me you had yourself a gal?" Alonza heard the slurred voice of Tom. He stood against a tree swinging a whiskey bottle.

"Are you drunk, Tom?" Alonza asked.

Tom lifted his body from the tree and moved toward Jennie Bee with his lips puckered. "Give me a little kiss too Jennie Bee."

"Stop, Tom," Alonza said and pushed him away from Jennie Bee. His drunken stupor made him fall to the ground.

"Boy, you touched me. I'll have you beat to death."

"Come on, Tom," Alonza said. Then he reached to help his brother.

"Don't touch me."

"What's wrong with you?"

“You think you better than me?” Tom spoke as he stood swaying and spilling drops of whiskey from his bottle and from his mouth. “Well you are. You are better than I am at everything, Alonza. I taught you to read and write. Now you read and write better than I write. I taught you math. You add faster than I do. You are bigger, stronger, handsomer. I see the way women, colored and white, look at you. They laugh at my skinny body.”

Tom’s tears met the snot from his nose, “They laugh at me. I’m Massa’s son and they laugh at me.” He pushed his fist into the pallid skin that covered his chest.

“Tom, come on. Don’t do this. You’re drunk. I’ll take you home.”

“You are nothing but a slave. Leave me alone. Just leave me alone.” Tom pulled away from Alonza and disappeared into comfort of the night.

“Mama Flo, we didn’t hear ya.” Jennie Bee said.

Mama Flo looked at her son. “I told ya. One day you’s know you’s black and he white.” Then she turned and walked away.

Two weeks passed before Tom made his way back to the slave quarters. What was odd about his return was that he came to the cotton fields, which he rarely did, and he had John, the overseer, follow him through the row of cotton where Alonza was located. When Alonza saw him coming, he stopped his picking, as did Jennie Bee who was standing beside him. Many of the other slaves stopped also. His walk was forceful and determined. He did not stop until he was close enough to smell Alonza’s breath.

“Are you through sulking?” Alonza asked.

“I come for Jennie Bee.”

Tom reached for the hand of Jennie Bee. Alonza pushed it away.

“Watch you manners boy. I’s hate to lose you being you my best picker,” John stated.

“My sixteenth birthday is next week. Daddy said it’s about time I got me a slave gal. Come on Jennie Bee you coming with me.”

“No Massa Tom, please no,” Jennie Bee pleaded as she was pulled away. However, her voice was small and hopeless against the singe of the sun, the helplessness of the slaves and the inhumanity of the Massa.

The boys never spoke again.

Alonza made a few attempts to visit Jennie Bee in the big house, but the other slaves stopped him. “Ain’t nothing you can do boy. Just find yoself another gal.” Tom no longer came to the slave quarters. Jennie Bee was now a house servant. She came one night to the cabin Alonza shared with Flo. Alonza was out, but Flo was there to school her.

“Don’t git my boy killed Jennie Bee. Go on back to the big house. Ya don’t belong hur no mo.”

Slowly, Alonza settled into his loneliness. There was no Tom or Jennie Bee to fill his days anymore. In the cotton fields, especially during the Virginia summers, the sun made no preference to skin color. It baked mulatto, black, brown and white skin all the same. Sweat beads raced to see which would drop from the faces of the slaves first. One particularly hot summer day in 1856 as Alonza walked toward the cabin he and his mother shared, Old Pete, the oldest slave on the plantation, cranked up his voice and song.

Take me to the river of salvation,
Oh Lord please take me.

Take me to the river of salvation
Where I know I can rest in peace.

This meant there was a meeting. It was rare that the slaves came together. When they did, it meant someone was dead. Someone had run away, gotten caught and would be dead soon, or someone was to be sold. It was only a few men that gathered in the clearing in the woods behind the slave cabins. At age sixteen Alonza was included among the gathering of men. Once the chosen few had been informed of the situation, they would report back to the other slaves.

“We hear tell Massa is gon sell summa us down the river.” Moses was first to speak. He was sweet on the new house gal. When she could, she fed information to Moses that affected the slaves.

“We been knowin this gon happen,” Benjamin said. “Traders from down south loves to buy Virginny slaves. They say we’s the best cotton pickers.” The slaves had heard tale that the south was coming into the cotton industry. The southern farmers saw Virginia as the model for a successful cotton plantation and a factory for hard-working cotton pickers.

“Well, wants be me. I’s too old,” said Old Pete. He was probably forty-five but slavery made him look sixty-five.

“Alonza probably be you or Jimmy. Yall be the best cotton pickers and the youngest. Yall bring n the most money,” Moses stated. It was true. Jimmy with his long arms and fingers could pick a hundred pounds of cotton with ease, and Alonza with his equally boundless arms and thick, lengthy fingers could beat him by twenty pounds.

“I don’t want to go down south Moses,” Alonza said.

“What you gon do, boy?”

“I’s run away first.”

“Well, that just kill ya mama when they drags you back and beat ya to death.

Ain’t no hope in runnin away. I’s seen too many beat to death. Never seen anybody make it.”

The men talked a little more among themselves. Each trying to justify why the other would be the one sold down the river. Alonza and Jimmy listened to the older men spit their words of inadequacies. In that instance Alonza understood that sometimes laziness was more about survival than lack.

When Alonza returned to the cabin, he was barely inside before John, the overseer, opened the door.

“Come with me, boy. Massa askin for ya.”

“What Massa want with my boy, John?”

“Mine yo own business now, Flo.”

Alonza had never seen his mother this way. She stood in front of John and made direct eye contact. “Dis boy is my business.”

“Don’t sass me, gal,” John said and pushed Flo to the ground. Alonza made a move toward John, but Flo quickly jumped up and stood between the two men.

“Don’t, Alonza, don’t.”

Flo looked at her son, and she knew. She knew she had lost him. She didn’t touch him. Instead, she turned away. She turned her back to her flesh just as his father was about to do. Alonza wanted her to fight, but he knew she had lost her fight years ago.

“Hope ain’t nothing but your worst enemy.” She had told him many, many times.

When Alonza left the Gossom Plantation, Tom watched. There were no signs of the brotherly love they had once shared. Tom called for Jennie Bee to bring him a glass of water. When she came onto the porch, her massive belly stared at Alonza. He turned his head and never looked back.

Alonza's new home was in the deep southwestern part of Alabama. Where the Virginia sun baked, the Alabama sun burned. It burned his skin, and it burned his memories of Virginia. Alonza knew before his feet touched the dust of the Smithdale Plantation that he was going to run. He was sixteen years old.

CHAPTER THREE

1851-1861

Katie, the name slavery had given her. However, the soft feminine name of Katie did not tell her story. The name did not speak to the anger in her soul. It could not speak to the quest for freedom that she longed to have for her two boys nor for the continuous ache in her heart for Alonza.

Alonza noticed Katie when she was twelve, when the name Katie was still soft and hopeful, and when Alonza still had hopes of freedom for himself. He noticed the hips that grew underneath the cloth of her tater dress. He noticed the way the calico bag that held the cotton she picked separated her two small breasts. He liked her naivety, and even though they were slaves, he loved her spirit of freedom.

“What it like in Virginny?” She asked him.

“Not bad.”

“You miss it.”

“I miss my mama.”

“Never knew my mammie.”

When Katie grew into fourteen, Alonza could no longer hide his desires. Katie had grown into a woman-child. She had smooth sable skin with sensual sweat glands. She grew tall with straight black hair that romanced the rays of the sun. He was there when at the age of fifteen she screamed in agony as she pushed out their first son. Alonza named

him Tom. His desire for Katie was massive, and he couldn't wait for her young body to repair itself. He was there ten months later when their second son was born. He named him George.

"I loves yall so much," Katie said as he looked at her sons and her husband.

"We love you too, mama," Alonza said. He kissed her wet lips and let his tongue touch the richness of her lactic breasts. He stopped himself and took his older son out into the night air. In the midst of the chaos between slavery and freedom, nights in Alabama were calming. Nights were the only times slaves could rest and dream. Tom looked down at his older son. The infant's tiny eyes were studying the face of his father.

"I named you Tom after my brother because I want you to be free. Even though I grew to hate him, he still was free, and that's what I want for you and your brother. Freedom."

Katie had never understood love. Slavery had taken her mother from her. She understood belonging to a massa. She understood a slave community. She understood caring about fellow slaves. But love, she never understood. Not until Alonza, Tom and George came into her life. And the thought of losing them was one she wanted blocked from her mind. But Alonza had other ideas.

"When I make it. I'll come back for you and the boys."

"Alonza, please don't talk like dat. It scares me. What if you git caught? What me and the boys gon do?"

"There is talk of a war for freedom. I can join the war."

"No please, please don't."

Katie hated Alonza's talk of freedom, of running away. To where? The odds of making it up north were too slim. Katie had seen what Massa did to runaway slaves. She had seen what pleasure the overseer took in beating someone to death. What pleasure the dogs got in tearing flesh from dark skin. But the thought of her boys being free made her listen to Alonza and his plan for freedom. Slowly Katie came around to Alonza's way of thinking. She began to see Tom and George going to school. She started to see herself walking to town and buying flour to make biscuits for her family. She listened more and more to his talks of freedom. She believed more and more in his plan to escape, and she started to believe more and more in them having a life of freedom.

"My mama told me not to hope. But how can you not hope when you have children." His words whispered into her ear over and over again.

So on an Alabama spring night, she left the cabin with Alonza while the boys slept. She followed him into the woods and watched as he disappeared behind the thick darkest of the night, tracing his path, feeling his feet hit the ground. She stayed for hours running with him in her mind, watching his chest rise and fall, hearing his thoughts of equality. She dreamed of freedom until she could no longer hide in the darkness. Finally, she went back to the cabin with her sons.

One, two, three days passed. Each day moved the pendulum of hope a little higher. The slaves smiled at each other. Katie's hope was their hope.

"Yo man been gon a long time." Mama Sarah, one of Katie's slave friends, whispered as she covered her brown teeth.

"Yeah, I's pray so hard, Mama Sarah. I's pray so hard."

“Me too, Katie, I’s love ta see you’s and ya family makes it. Give us all a lil hope.”

Two weeks passed before Alonza was brought back. He was beaten in front of Katie, in front of his sons. Katie begged Massa for mercy but her pleas were muffled under the screams of her husband. Alonza was beaten just enough to lie in agony for two days before death took him. Old John, a slave who had been on the Smithdale Plantation for over thirty years, started to sing a song Alonza had brought from Virginia.

Take me to the river of salvation,
Oh Lord please take me.
Take me to the river of salvation
Where I know I can rest in peace.

For weeks afterwards Katie took her boys and went to the clump of dirt that sucked the remnants of her husband. Sometimes they ate their supper on the grave of their father. Katie did not hide her bitterness. She wore it everyday, displayed it to the other slaves, to her boys and even to Massa. She hated everyone. She hated Massa for killing her husband. She hated the overseer for beating him to death. She hated the other slaves who did nothing but watch. She hated the God that ignored her pleas. She hated Alonza for giving her a dream of freedom. Freedom was nothing but a slave’s worse enemy. She now understood the words. Katie cared nothing for freedom, but she had learned to care about family. She had learned to care about happy, and Alonza had taken both from her.

“Katie, Massa gon get tired of ya, gal.” Mama Sarah said to Katie one day after she spat into some of his water. Mama Sarah managed to get the cup and refill it with clear water before Massa noticed. “He gon sell you away. Then what yo boys gon do?”

“What the odds of me seeing my boys grow up.” Katie threw the angry words at Mama Sarah. “Where yo boys Sarah? Where they at? Where yo girl child?” One of Sarah’s sons was dead. The other children had been sold away one by one.

“I don’t know. But I’s loved them for as long as I could. Ya missing the love while ya be hate in. It ain’t gon bring Alonza back.”

However, Katie heart was full of anger.

She loved her boys.

She hated Massa more.

When Massa could take no more, he sold Katie away. He said she was mean. Mean or tired, is there a difference when slavery owns your life? Katie was tired. Tired of thinking her story would be different. She was a slave just like the other slaves. Her man had been slaughtered by the overseer just like other slaves. She wasn’t different. She was just a slave to be sold and bartered like a bale of cotton.

Katie, the name slavery had given her. However, the soft feminine name of Katie did not tell her story. The name did not speak to the anger in her soul. It could not speak to the quest for freedom that she longed to have for her two boys nor for the continuous ache in her heart for Alonza.

When Katie got into the back of the wagon, she didn’t look back, not at her boys not at her life. She heard the cried of her two small sons, Tom five and George four.

“Mama, Mama,” floated through her ears. However, Katie could only handle the situation with cold indifference. She couldn’t look at them. She couldn’t love them. Ten hours later when she stepped unto the auction block in Birmingham, Alabama, she heard a voice say, “Female slave, age about twenty, her name is Katie.”

CHAPTER FOUR

2009

“I just wanted to make life better for my children. Just like your great, great grandparents Alonza and Katie. That’s why I marched that day. I just wanted a better life.”

The steel industry was booming in Birmingham, Alabama, in the fifties and sixties. Whether you were black or white, to get a job at one of the local steel mills, U.S. Pipe, Acipco, TCI, or Stockham Valves and Fitting, was to ensure your family a decent life. In the spring of 1952 when Daddy came home and told Mama he had been hired at Acipco, this was the start of their quest for a better life. Prior to working for Acipco, Daddy worked for the city of Birmingham as a tree pruner. The first apartment for Daddy and Mama was located on the Southside of downtown Birmingham at 13th Street and 11th Avenue South. That section of town was simply known as the Southside. They proudly parked their 1946 Fleetline Chevrolet in front of their new place. The apartment consisted of one room and a kitchen. “I opened a charge account at Marks Fitzgerald furniture store. It was one of the few stores where Negroes could get credit.” Daddy and Mama brought a stove, kitchen table, four chairs and a bedroom set. Shortly after moving in, the newlyweds realized they had picked the wrong side of town. “It was common to hear cussing, fights and gunshots all night. When I went to work, I worried about your Mama. She usually went over her mother’s home in Titusville. Sometimes her sisters would

come over until I came home. One morning I opened the front door to find a dead man barely ten feet away. I knew then we had to leave, but I was working for the city and little money was coming in.” However, as with most parents, when my brother came along, Tom Jr., my parents became desperate to find better living conditions. Tom Jr. was born January 21, 1952. In April of that same year, after a lot of begging and pleading with God, Daddy was hired at Acipco where he worked for next forty-five years. He never took a day of sick leave.

I always laughed when Daddy told the story of getting his first paycheck from Acipco. According to him, with the help of my Aunt Clara, the next day Mama moved to a new place. They moved the table, four chairs, the bedroom set and the stove, along with a baby bed to a new apartment in Smithfield near Legion Field. Daddy laughed and rubbed his ebony hand through his closely cropped white hair and said, “They sent word to me on the job to come to the new apartment in Smithfield. Your Mama hated that old place. By the time I got home your brother, Mama and your Aunt Clara were there sitting around as if we had lived there for five years.” The new apartment consisted of two rooms and a kitchen.

“Aunt Clara was there?” I asked the first time I heard the story.

“Yeah, she lived with us for a while. Your Uncle Akon was in the service.”

My mother’s older sister Clara Tankersley married my father’s younger brother Willie (Akon) Gossom one year after Daddy and Mama married. They were the best of friends. There were other brothers and sisters. My father came from a family of twelve and my mother from a family of eight. But those four were the closest. Daddy and Akon

are still close. They talk on the phone everyday except for the times they travel to the casino in Mississippi. Mama and Clara, I'm sure, are still the best of friends in heaven.

Ten years later, about 1962, Mama and Daddy started to look for a house. They found one on the north side of town near the Birmingham Airport in a new community called Rosalind Heights. By then there were three children; my younger sister and I had come into the world. We were all in school. Mama insisted we go to Catholic school, which put a heavy strain on the budget. Daddy sometimes worked three jobs to make sure we had nice things. Sometimes nice things were simply tuition, books and uniforms. At night he cleaned several of the twenty-four floors in the City Federal building located in downtown Birmingham on 20th Street and Second Avenue and on weekends he worked plumbing jobs. Sleep was not huge on his list of requirements.

I came home from college one Friday evening. I greeted Mama and ate some of the strawberry ice cream she made for me. I caught up on the latest high school gossip with my sister. Then I went to see Daddy at the City Federal building. He took me to the roof. I was able to look over the city of Birmingham. I'll never forget that feeling. The way the cool breeze touched my face and moved through my hair. It made me think of freedom: Freedom to do things my father never got the opportunity to do.

"I'm so proud of you going to college." I heard Daddy's voice. "You know I loved spelling. I always won the spelling bees.

"I know Daddy." He also told me this bit of information many times. I was a quiet child often getting lost in the blue of the sky or the white of the clouds. Maybe that's why I loved to hear Daddy's stories.

“I loved math too. I just liked going to school.” His voice softened when he added. “But papa needed me to work the farm. See Donna, when you get your education that’s something no one can take from you.”

“I know Daddy.”

It was nice being there with my daddy. I went there because I was going out with some friends later, and I knew when I woke in the morning Daddy would be gone in search of work to support his family.

On some paydays, which I remember was every other Thursday, we, my mother, sister, brother and I would go to the yard and stand outside the fence waiting for Daddy to give Mama his paycheck. The yard was a huge-opened space where the men worked bracing the heavy steel pipes for shipment. To us it was exciting. We would see who could spot Daddy first. Then we waved until he came over to us. I suppose at times it was embarrassing for Mama, but she never let us know. That was her way. He gave Mama the check, and we would go shopping, not for fancy dresses or hats but for food and toiletries. Nevertheless, we were happy. We never understood that we were poor.

A few years after moving to Rosalind Heights Daddy and Mama started to think of how much better life would be if Acipco promoted the black employees just as they did whites. So did many of the other black workers. It was in the sixties that the black men in the local steel plants started to talk of protest against the treatment of the black workers. Blacks and whites worked side-by-side everyday in the yard; however, whites were promoted. They were given jobs that kept them out of the heat of the summer and the chill of the winter. They made more money than their black counterparts did. A class action lawsuit was filed in 1965. The black plaintiffs held most of their meetings at the

16th Street Baptist Church, the place where two years earlier four little black girls died in one of the many KKK bombings in the city of Birmingham. Remembering this tragedy made the quest for equality somewhat an act of appeasement.

Daddy attended most of the meetings. For a while he was blackballed for this. “There were little things like not giving me any overtime.” However, when my brother received a football scholarship to Auburn University things changed.

“Hey, Tom is this your boy?” The white foreman asked and placed the newspaper in Daddy’s view.

“Yeah.”

“Well how about that,” he said and walked away.

During game time the black men had a radio on one side of the yard and the white men had a radio on the opposite side. My brother was a wide receiver. Whenever he made a catch, the white men would look over and raise their hands, and the foreman would be sure to walk over and announce.

“Your boy just caught a pass.”

Football made life better for a while. Daddy was never promoted. Sometimes I think it was more because Daddy never felt confident in his reading and writing abilities. But he was always our hero.

“I told your Mama we were going to march.”

“When was this, Daddy?”

“I think around 1972, ‘73 because you and your brother were in college.”

“What did Mama say?” I asked.

“She wanted to march too. I didn’t want her there. I didn’t want anybody to know my family.”

“Why?”

Daddy looked at me like dummy you can’t figure that one out. Then he looked away and started to tap his index finger on the kitchen table, our favorite spot for conversation.

“If any violence broke out, I didn’t want you guys getting hurt. Back then people would use anything to scare you. I didn’t want them to know what you guys looked like. I was afraid for my family. Somehow, your brother found out, and he wanted to come and march. I was afraid for him to come. I thought he might lose his scholarship. I told him not to tell you. You were in your first year at Auburn, and I definitely didn’t want you or him marching.”

I could tell Daddy started to think about the “what-ifs,” all the things that could have gone wrong. So I moved the conversation back to the protest.

“So what was the march like?”

“I remember the men had to gather at least one hour before the march. We had a pretty good crowd. I have a picture of myself standing with my sign. We were about fifteen minutes from leaving, and I looked up to see your Mama, Kim and Tommy coming. I didn’t want them there, but I knew it was no use telling your Mama to go home. Besides she was more upset with your brother’s hairstyle. He had those plaits. You know those rows of plaits.”

“You mean cornrows, Daddy.”

“Yeah, that’s it, cornrows.”

“Yeah, I remember when I got them; she was so angry with me. But she let me keep them.”

“Yeah, but she complained to me every night.”

I shrugged it off and continued to question him about the march.

“We started from 19th Street and 7th Avenue in front of the old courthouse. We walked down 19th Street and turned right onto Fourth Avenue. People yelled and asked us what we were marching for. Everyone had something to shout back: freedom, equality, money. Some waved. Others made a fist. You know, what was that called? Donna, you remember.”

“You mean the Black Power sign.”

“Yeah, yeah, that was it. The march was pretty peaceful. There were no policemen to protect us or any KKK to spit on us. We walked along Fourth Avenue and ended the protest in front of the Carver Theater.”

“What happened next?”

“Everything went fine. We walked side by side, me, your mother, Kim and Tommy. We all took turns holding the sign.”

“Do you remember what the sign said?”

“No. Some of the committee members made the signs the night before. I can’t remember what any of them said. I just know it was about unfair treatment at Acipco and other steel plants.”

“I wish I had been there.”

“I did not want you there. Like I said, back then I was afraid. Now I guess it would have been OK. I remember people along the street joined. By the time we made it to the end of the march, we may have had over a 100 people.”

Daddy leaned back in the kitchen chair, crossed his arms and rested them on his chest. I knew he was silently reminiscing about the past. So I decided to leave his memories alone for a while. I simply said, “Daddy, I’m proud of you.”

Later, I asked my brother and sister what they remembered most about the march. Both said they remembered carrying the sign. They also remembered being proud, proud of themselves and proud of Mama and Daddy.

My brother went back to school without incident. Acipco settled the suit in 1975. Daddy got back pay. Mama was able to buy some of the luxury things she had done without for some many years, like formal dining room furniture. To my father the march was all about freedom, freedom to be a man able to take care of his family.

CHAPTER FIVE

1865

*Two months later Mama Sarah took to her bed and gave up on life a week before
it gave up on her*

1865. Freedom. Freedom to run without the smell of slavery barking at your heels. At age seven what did freedom mean?

When the word of emancipation traveled to southern Alabama and landed its promise on the Smithdale Plantation, Tom heard the older slaves rejoice. “We be free, boy. We be free.” He heard the words so many times he began to form a song in his head.

We be free boy
We be free
Life is good
Cos we now be free.

Joy was an old friend that slaves rarely saw. So, when the other slaves jumped and danced and song at freedom, Tom and his younger brother joined in. They shuffled their feet when old John showed his sable teeth and when Mama Sarah loosened her head rag. They laughed when Willie boy, only ten years old did an impersonation of Frank the overseer. They clapped when Blackman pulled his imagery whip and pretended to turn it upon the overseer’s bare skin. Tom and George enjoyed the festivities. There had been little for them to rejoice about. Their father had been beaten to death for trying to chase

this thing called freedom, and their mother had been sold away for rebelling. So the smiles on their young faces were glad to be back. But when the freed slaves started to talk about leaving, Tom's joy was silenced. Somewhere in his young brain he knew he would not leave. His heart was still with his mother. If slaves were free, then surely his mother would come back for he and George. Surely, she would come back home. What was home? Home was picking cotton from the time the sun opened its eyes until it closed them many hours later. To Tom home was a dream, a dream that involved finding his mother. Home for Tom was here on the plantation until his mother came to claim him.

While waiting for his dream, Tom and George grew into massive young men. At twelve and thirteen their frames were just below six feet, and their bodies were hard and lean with almond skin that glisten under the heat of the savage sun. They had developed into the best farmers. They understood a lot about picking cotton and gin houses. They even commanded the best sale price for their bales of cotton. They learned a lot from Blackman who had stayed behind when most of the other slaves went north still seeking freedom.

Blackman was towering and impermeable. He was called Blackman because of the color of his skin. It was dark. No it was black, but it was smooth and rich like the skin of a ripe tomato. "Git this o skin from my pappy. He was pure Afrikan." Blackman told the boys. Very few people seeped through to the heart of Blackman. Tom and George had managed to slip through the pores. "Ya thin I stay hur cos of ya boys. No I's stay cos of this old skin I's got. It's easy to find no matter where I goes. This old skin is easy to fines, bring me nothing but hard times. So, ain't got nothing to do with ya boys."

“Come on in her and git some food. Ya boys bin workin all day.” Mama Sarah called to Tom, George and Blackman. Mama Sarah and Old John had stayed behind on the plantation also. According to Old John they were husband and wife. “She be mines and I be hers. Dat’s all anybody need ta know.”

Mama Sarah was a little woman with light skin that had turned to a sullen shade of tried grey over the years. Mama Sarah worked in the big house. Over the years she had preformed many duties for Massa. Now, old age had made her suitable only for cooking. She had a quiet manner until she heard emancipation. When she understood what it meant, her voice found its way through her throat and out of her small, ruddy lips. She let Massa know that the few men he had left working in the cotton fields needed to be fed well, and she planned to do just that.

“That sure is a lot of food you cooking, Mama Sarah,” Massa said to Sarah. She had her back turned away from him when he entered the kitchen.

“Yes, it is sa. When I’s finish feeding ya and yo family, I’s goin take the rest to the men in the cotton field,” Sarah answered still with her back to Massa Smith.

“What you say, Mama Sarah?”

Mama Sarah turned so fast to face Massa Smith that her tiny body also left the wooden floor of the kitchen. The eyes she casted on him were no longer those of docile Sarah the slave. They were the eyes of an obstinate, emancipated woman.

“We ain’t no slaves no mo, sir.” She refused to call him massa anymore. “We human beings now. We work hard fo ya and the least you can do is feed us proper.”

Their stares battled for a few seconds until Sir understood Mama Sarah's defiance and dropped his gaze.

Old John would leave his sitting stool at the north edge of the cotton field at sundown to help Mama Sarah bring the food to the old slave quarters they shared. She had managed to change the cabin into a home with the addition of some yellow curtains and a table with four chairs Sir had thrown out. Old John did not do much cotton picking these days. He mostly sat on his stool and watched the young men work. He wore an old, dirty, brown, flop hat to protect himself from the heat. But nothing could save his hands. They were old, rugged hands with stories of sorrow popping through the large veins. Years of cotton picking and weather exposure had turned them in to dark appendages with fingers that curled and snaked like forbidden back roads. He didn't say much. Mostly did a lot of listening. But Tom and George knew he loved them because of what he said to them years earlier.

"Ya boys be needin some parents. I liked yo mammy and pappy. So I's stay and take car of ya. Besides where we's going, me and Mama Sarah just stay here. When we dead, bury us by our boy up yonder on the south hill." Their boy had been murdered. In those days it wasn't called by that name because that name implied a wrongdoing. He was beaten to death because he ran away. The color of his skin did not make the crime an act of wrongdoing.

Willie Boy, the Cornstalk, came into the small cabin late. He was part of the makeshift family that formed after 1865. He was called Cornstalk because he was long and willowy and had an odd yellow/greenish color like a cornstalk. Willie Boy was good

with numbers. Somehow he taught himself to count. He counted the bags of cotton and figured out the price for each. Massa Smith paid him some nice coins for his service. However, he went into town and gambled most of his earnings away.

“Can I go into town with you tonight, Cornstalk?” Tom asked.

Willie Boy looked at Mama Sarah. He knew she didn’t like Tom going into town. But she, like all the others, understood his need. Tom didn’t care anything about gambling. He sat outside the old room and questioned any new faces about his mama. “Have you heard tale of a slave woman named Katie, long black hair, tall, big, mixed with some Indian.” Some would give him hope and tell stories of seeing her in Mississippi, Georgia or in eastern Alabama. Some would simply push him aside to make their way into the gambling room.

“When are you going to stop this Tom? Mama’s not coming back for us.” George said. George pretty much did whatever his older brother said, but lately he had started to part ways with Tom about the return of their mother.

“I heard Massa say he sold her to someone in Mississippi.” Tom thought aloud.

“That was seven years ago. No telling where she is now,” George yelled letting the anger blow from his nose and stretch his round face.

“Mama won’t forget about us no matter where she is,” Tom stated.

“She’s died. That’s where she is,” George continued to yell.

“Maybe she made her way up to the creek Indians,” Tom said ignoring George’s ranting.

“Where?”

“In Wetumpka that’s where she said she was from. Her mother was a African slave and her father was Creek Indian.”

“I don’t remember that story.”

“Well, I do. Mama told it to us every night before bedtime.”

“Tom you are dreaming,” George said and left the cabin.

For the next four years everything continued this way. Mama Sarah cooked, Old John watched, Willie Boy gambled. Tom and George bickered over their mother. The only change was in Blackman. He had found himself a young girl working on another farm. Most evenings he walked the five miles to her farm. Mama Sarah said, “Any day dat boy be gone from us.”

One day, when the sun seemed so hot that its rays formed whips of heat that beat the backs of the cotton pickers, Tom looked up and noticed that Old John had fallen from his stool. Tom, George, Blackman and Willie Boy raced to the old stool. They all stopped when they saw Old John’s body laid out in the dirt path. He still had his old, dirty, brown, flop hat attached to his head.

“John. John. You al right?” Blackman called.

“I’s seen my boys and girl. Tell Sarah I’s seen the children,” Old John replied. Blackman picked him up and cradled him in his massive arms. Old John’s forty-five year old body looked more liked sixty-five when it went free in Blackmon’s massive arms.

Two months later Mama Sarah took to her bed and gave up on life a week before it gave up on her. The boys, Tom, George, Blackman and Willie Boy, watched over her day and night. Many of the other plantation workers came, as did Sir and his family. Sir wanted to send for the doctor, but Mama Sarah objected. “I’s ready to go. I’s real tired.”

George couldn’t hold back his anger from Tom. “She is our mama, while you so busy looking for a dead one.” George words tore at Tom’s heart. He loved Mama Sarah. He kneeled by her bed. He covered her tiny hands with his immense ones. He moved the thick mass of wiry hair from her small face and kissed her lips. “Mama Sarah I love you. I’m sorry I never told you.”

Mama Sarah’s forty years looked more like sixty when she died in the slave cabin with the yellow curtain hanging in the window.

The makeshift family fell apart without the glue of Mama Sarah and Old John. Blackman married the young girl on the next plantation and moved to a new home. Willie Boy went into town one night to gamble and never came back. The brothers saw no reason to stay. They had no bonds with the other workers on the plantation. On a hot summer day, the brothers walked to the end of the dirt road entering the Smithdale Plantation. The small cabin looked like an aimless dot floating in the glare of the summer sun. They bid each other farewell. Tom headed east toward Wetumpka, and George headed north toward a life of equality. The boys never saw each other again.

SECTION II: THE ZEARN MASTER

CHAPTER ONE

WARM UP

Tippi Taneha Thomas loved basketball. As far as she was concerned it was right up there with creation. God didn't rest on the seventh day. He created basketball. Therefore, it was her duty to play the game as often as she could. Tippi had a little brother, Emmett, who also loved the game of basketball. They played in the backyard for hours, beating anyone who dared to challenge them. Her brother was good, but he was never going to be as good as she was. Never.

CHAPTER TWO

PRE-GAME ACTIVITIES

The leggy girl snatched the rebound and dribbled the ball to the three point line, which was actually a flowerpot that had been toppled so much its duties no longer involved any kind of pottery. She bent her knees just as her father had taught her, raised the ball just to the left of her face, flicked her wrist and released.

“Swish, nothing but net.” She shouted. “I win. I win again.”

She had beaten the four Feeny brothers again: number one, number two, number three and number four. One by one she had taken them all to the hoop. They were tall and handsome according to all the eighth grade girls at Saint Mary’s Catholic School, but they didn’t have the heart and not a one of them had the smarts to beat her at anything, especially basketball.

“I let you win, Tippi,” the first Feeny said.

“Yeah, right, Number 1. You can’t shoot, and you can’t defend.”

Everyone referred to each brother as a number because they were quadruplets and all had the same first name, Christopher: Christopher junior or number one, Christopher the second, Christopher the third and Christopher the fourth.

CHAPTER THREE

PRE-GAME DRILLS

Since Tippi was the oldest by three years, she was in charge during playtime. Sometimes she was so mean to Emmett. When he was born, her best friend Madisyn told her the rules. If you have a little sister you have to be very nice to her. But if you have a little brother you have to be very mean to him, so she was mean to Emmett. She would block all his shots. She never gave him any free throws even though she fouled him all the time, and if he did get a shot off, she tripped him to be sure she got the rebound.

Tippi and Emmett were both very tall like their father. He played power forward for the Atlanta Hawk's NBA team. Emmett looked like he was twelve, even though he was only ten. However, he still wasn't quite as tall as Tippi. Tippi could dribble the ball and shoot very well. Emmett could dribble, but he wasn't a good shooter. Tippi could beat him easily, and she made sure she rubbed it deep into his psyche.

Emmett, Emmett is a hoot.
He can dribble,
but he can't shoot.

When Emmett got sad, his father pulled him aside and whispered a secret to him.

"Tell me the secret?" Tippi demanded one day as they played in the backyard.

"If you're nicer to me, and let me be in charge sometimes," Emmett said as he dribbled past Tippi and went in for a lay-up.

"You can't be in charge because you're not the oldest or the tallest."

Just as Emmett released the basketball, Tippi came from behind and blocked the shot.

Emmett bent his thick, brown knees and spread his long arms to play defense.

“Daddy says one day I will be taller than you. Then I will be in charge.”

“You’ll never be as tall as me, and you will never be in charge.”

Tippi tried to go to her right. Emmett blocked her.

“Yes I will. You remember the future picture.”

“That’s a bunch of crap,” Tippi replied. She did a crossover and moved the ball to her left and shot. “Swish, two more for me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

OPENING CEREMONY

Last year at the Lakers' game Tippi, Emmett, Madisyn and the Feenys—number one, number two, number three and number four had their future pictures made. A woman with silver and black hair, beady-brown eyes, dressed in purple, drew pictures of what they would look like in five years. Sure enough, Emmett was at least four inches taller than Tippi. Emmett was so proud of his picture. He took it home and hung it on his wall as if the picture was some kind of ancient relic. Madisyn liked her future picture also. Her legs were about three inches longer, and she was wearing a short skirt. She made a point to show it to Feeny Number Two. The Feenys' picture was weird. They were still handsome, but the red, black and grey background was so dark, it made them look wicked. Tippi didn't think much of the future pictures. In her drawing she had on a basketball uniform and that was all that mattered to her. However, she was in awe of the weird lady who drew them. She was almost seven feet tall. She was thick and hard. Everything on her looked as if it would explode. She looked at Tippi and winked. It wasn't a playful wink. It was as if behind her beady-brown eyes there was a sinister plot, and the wink made Tippi feel as if she were somehow a part of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

LINE UP

Tippi and Madisyn had been friends since forever. They told everyone they had been friends since “once upon a time.” They started four-year-old kindergarten together at St Mary’s. Now that they were in the eighth grade, they were inseparable.

Madisyn loved basketball too. Although she couldn’t handle the Feeny brothers, (Baloney! She told everybody she couldn’t because she was beginning to develop a crush on Number Two, and she didn’t want to beat him), she could beat Emmett. When she did, she would sing no less than three refrains of

Emmett, Emmett is a hoot.
He can dribble,
but he can’t shoot.

Then she and Tippi gave each other chest bumps and high fives.

Lately, besides her crush on Feeny, Madisyn had become interested in being a cheerleader rather than a basketball player.

“Yuck!” Tippi said. “How could you?”

“I think the uniforms are cute. Besides, I don’t like being all sweaty and stinky.”

“I’m not sweaty and stinky.”

“Oh no, not you.”

“Yes, me, but I don’t care. I’ll always play basketball.” Tippi picked up a ball and started to practice free throws. Madisyn grabbed another ball and stood beside her.

“Tippi, are we still best friends?” Madisyn asked.

“Always,” Tippi replied.

Now instead of practicing basketball, Madisyn was constantly doing silly cheerleading jumps: toe touches, tucks, spread eagles and straights. The problem was she couldn’t jump any higher than a one-foot wooden stool. To make things worse, Madisyn had started to talk more and more about Feeny number two using words like cute, dreamy and sweet.

“Don’t make me vomit, Madisyn,” Tippi said.

“All the other girls in school think they are cute. Why don’t you?”

“Are you kidding me? They don’t even know how to post up.”

Tippi wanted to shake Madisyn until she woke up from whatever dream world she was living in. However until then, she replaced the words cute, dreamy and sweet with goofy, uncoordinated and couldn’t hit a jump shot if he attended the Kobe Bryant School for the Hopeless.

CHAPTER SIX

FIRST QUARTER

Tippi and Emmett were always so excited to go to the games in Phillips Arena to watch their father play. Tonight they were playing the Toronto Raptors.

“Tippi and Emmett, it’s time to go,” their mother called.

They had never been to Toronto, but ever since she was little, Tippi imagined it was a faraway place with tall, angry monsters running around in gym shorts.

Emmett always wore a basketball uniform just like his father’s. Although she secretly preferred to wear a basketball uniform, Tippi had started to dress more like her mother. Since she was now thirteen, her mother wanted her to be more girly. Sometimes her father got involved.

“Now young lady, you will do as your mother says,” but as soon as he closed the door to her room he would say, “You know your mother wasn’t always a girly girl.”

“No way,” Tippi said.

“Yeah, way.”

“Well, what happened to her, Daddy?”

“She started to think about the young boy down the street in a different way.”

“You mean the way Madisyn thinks of that Feeny boy.”

“Yeah, like that.”

“Well, I’m never going to change.”

“You will one day. Until then, can you wear those ‘frou-frou’ clothes for your mother? And one more thing.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Can you be a bit nicer to your brother?”

“Will you teach me how to dunk? And will you get me the new zipper sneakers?”

“Oh, your mother will really love that.”

“Please, Daddy, please. You know how bad I want those shoes.”

“OK, we’ve got a deal.” Tippi stood on her bed, and they gave each other chest bumps.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TIME OUT

She tried. She really tried. But she hated the pink snow boots. She despised the pink, yellow and blue girly sweaters her mother made her wear, and she absolutely loathed the skinny leg jeans. Sometimes she would sneak a basketball shirt under her sweater, which she did for the Toronto game. Emmett told her that she was disobeying Mama, but she still did it anyway. She said to Emmett, “You’d better not tell.” Their mother overheard Tippi threatening Emmett.

“You’d better not tell what, young lady?”

“Nothing Mama.”

“Young lady I’ve told you about being so mean to your brother.”

“She’s not mean to me Mama.”

“See how much he loves you. Maybe if you fall and hit that hard head of yours you’ll realize how much he loves you and how much you love him. Now hurry up! We don’t want to get caught in the Christmas traffic. There is a storm coming. I want to get to the arena before it hits. Call Madisyn and the Feenys and tell them to get over here now. I’m leaving in twenty minutes.”

“Oh, Mama, Madisyn isn’t coming. She is going to some silly cheerleading camp.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

RESUME PLAY

Tippi and Emmett loved to go to the games around Christmas time. They inhaled the smell of the pine trees like chunks of cotton candy. They also got to spend more time with their Grandma. Grandma was the coolest. She wore her hair in thick braids that hung to the middle of her back, and she knew everything about basketball. She came to the games also. Daddy said Grandma taught him more about basketball than anyone did. Daddy said she was so good in her day that if there had been a WNBA, she would have been a number one draft pick.

Just as they entered the arena, the rain came with huge chunks of hail included in the downpour. Tippi could hear the squealing of voices as they reacted to the hunks of hail hitting their bodies. The wind raced through the doors as other people entered the arena, blowing their hair and clothes into monstrous shapes. Tippi looked through the glass doors, and she could see pieces of paper flying and twirling in wild, erratic patterns.

“Let’s find our seats and get as far away from these glass doors as possible,” Tippi’s mother stated.

Once Tippi, Emmett, the Feenys, Mama and Grandma settled into their seats, right behind the Atlanta Hawk’s bench, they waved to Tippi’s father. Then everyone except Grandma went to buy a lot of treats.

Tippi’s mouth carved the popcorn and sweet treats her mother allowed them to eat at the games. Normally, she shoved fruits and vegetables in their faces.

As they walked to the concession the announcer stated, “The weather advisory has issued a tornado warning for this area. Please stay inside the building.”

“Kids, stay close to me. There are a lot of people here tonight. I don’t want us to get separated,” her mother added.

“Stay close to me, Tippi,” Number 1 stated.

Before she could reply with a smart remark the announcer shouted: “A tornado has been spotted ten minutes away from the arena. Everyone please get to the floor and cover your heads!”

Before the kids could get down a huge man bumped them and knocked them further away from Tippi’s mother. Another person bumped them and pushed them so far away that they could no longer see each other.

“Mama, Mama, Emmett, Emmett,” Tippi shouted.

The wind moaned so loud she could hardly hear her own voice. The moans came through the steel roof and ricochet off the walls and floor. People were everywhere flying, running, crawling though the pungent smell of burnt food and sour air. Tippi thought she heard her mother shout, “Tippi, Emmett, Feenys.” But, she knew they would never find each other. People kept bumping and spinning her in all directions. She could taste their torrid breath and feel their screams bounce off her body. She tried to drop to the floor, but she couldn’t. She felt her body being lifted and spun around and around as if she were caught up in one of the piercing moans of the wind. Popcorn jumped over her body. Red, green, and grape Twizzlers whirled around her head. The sharp smell of giant pickles stung her nostrils. Raisinets dribbled between her legs and arms. She covered her eyes and started to cry.

Her body moved north, south, then east, then west. Finally, there was an eerie quiet. She felt her body being slowly dropped onto a soft texture that felt like grass. Do I open my eyes she thought? Do I dare open my eyes?

The quiet was loud. It didn't move, whisper, or touch. "Mama? Mama?" Tippi whispered, but there was no answer. A little pint of courage talked her into opening her eyes. When she did, everything was different.

"Where am I?"

CHAPTER NINE

FOUL

Tippi closed her eyes tight, tighter.

“This is a dream. This is a dream. This is a dream.”

She kept repeating until she felt someone touch her shoulder. “Mama?” Tippi looked up into the face of a young, tall boy. He had on a basketball uniform much like her father’s.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Emmett.”

“Emmett, my brother’s name is Emmett. You look like his future picture.”

“Future what?”

Before Tippi could answer, the ground started to wobble like over-crowded bleachers.

Emmett shouted, “You better come with me. Now!”

Tippi took Emmett’s hand and he led her behind a pine tree.

“What’s happening?” Tippi asked.

“It’s the giants from the Frightening-Fang family. If we stay behind this tree, we will be all right.”

The ground shook so hard that Tippi and Emmett had to lie down to keep from being tossed and turned. So many pine needles were falling by the time the Frightening-

Fang family had passed by, Tippi and Emmett were totally covered. At last the ground became calm.

Emmett got up and shook the pine needles from his hair. He didn't see Tippi, but he saw her long braid sticking out of the bed of needles and pulled. Tippi stood up and shouted, "Stop!" She wiped the pine needles from her hair and clothes.

Then turning and looking in all directions, she asked Emmett. "Where am I?" Before he could answer she added. "I want to go back to the game."

"We can't leave."

"Why? I want to go back to my family. I don't want them to leave me. What happened to the arena?"

"You must listen to me, and do as I say. We have to stay here for the night. The smell of the pines will protect us from the Frightening-Fang family. In the morning we can leave. They don't come out during the day."

"How will I get home?"

"There is only one way. We have to find the Land of Zearn."

"The Land of what?"

"The Land of Zearn. There is a ZearnMaster there who will tell us how to get back home."

"Do you know the way?"

"We have to follow the orange-black road."

"But there is no such thing."

"Yes there is. You must trust me, and you must let me be in charge."

Tippi looked around. The arena was gone. There were no people, no concession stands, no cheerleaders. All she saw were pine trees and a road that curved, and wiggled, until it disappeared behind the horizon. If she ever wanted to see her family again, she had to trust this boy who looked so much like her brother.

So Tippi and Emmett slept on a bed of pine straw underneath the huge pine tree. The next morning they set out to find the Land of Zearn.

CHAPTER TEN

ONE ON ONE

The road was a shiny orange and had black stripes that sparkled in the sun. On the right side of the road were pink, yellow and blue flowers with stringy petals that looked liked pom-poms. When Tippi and Emmett veered from the road and danced among the pom-pom flowers, the flowers would shake, bounce and skyrocket high into the air. Once in the air, they burst into hundreds of happy faces, each smiling down on them. However, when Tippi and Emmett stepped back upon the orange-black road, the flowers immediately stopped shaking, bouncing and skyrocketing, looking as if they had never been disturbed. *This isn't so bad*, Tippi thought.

On the left side of the road were tall, brown trees with juicy, green apples hanging from every limb. Tippi and Emmett were famished, so they decided to veer to the left side of the road and pick some apples from the trees. However, the trees were too tall for either of them to reach the fruit. But, Emmett didn't hesitate. Hanging from each tree was a whistle. He walked to the nearest tree, pulled the whistle and blew it three times. The tree trunk trembled, and shook until it transformed itself into a locker.

"How did you do that? Tippi asked in an curious and confused voice.

Emmett opened the door and said, "Come on Tippi."

Tippi forgot about her inquisitiveness and followed Emmett inside the locker. There were steps that extended to the top of the tree. There was an opening at each branch. Emmett and Tippi climbed out one of the openings onto a branch, and they sat

and ate delicious green apples until they were stuffed. Tippi thought of how happy her mother would be to know she was eating apples instead of candy bars and ice cream.

Back on the orange-black road, they came upon a section that was lined on both sides with 7-foot basketball goals. Even though they were inanimate objects, there was something about them that seemed evil. They were all made of wood that looked as if it had been beaten, sawed, and chopped, until it was angry at the world. The colors ranged from dead brown, to sickly rust. The goals hung in the middle of the boards like broken noses on weary faces.

“Let’s hurry through this section. It looks spooky,” Tippi said.

“Tippi, do you know how to do side-to-side basketball drills?” Emmett asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Just trust me. When I say go, start the drill.”

Before Emmett could say the word, the goals on both side of the road began to bend, lower and lower. Then they hit the road so hard that they sent wood splinters in all directions. It was as if the goals were trying to smash Emmett and Tippi. Muffled words like “get out” and “we don’t want you here,” could be heard with each slap.

“Go!” Emmett shouted.

They both bent their knees and started the drill. They moved from side to side, shuffling their feet. At times, the goals would barely miss them. The goals seem to get angry and hit the ground harder and faster making Emmett and Tippi’s feet shuffled so rapidly Tippi didn’t know if she could keep up.

“Keep going. You can’t give up,” Emmett shouted to Tippi. But Tippi had stopped.

And as soon as she did, the goals in front of her hit the ground like thunder. The wood splinters hit her body and some landed in her snow boots stinging her feet. Emmett continued to shuffle not noticing that Tippi had stopped. When he reached the end of the goals, which was only a few feet from where Tippi had stopped, he realized she was not behind him.

“Tippi shuffle your feet remember the drill.”

“I can’t. My boots are filled with wood splinters.”

“Then pull them off. Hurry the goals are about to drop again.”

“I can’t.”

“You can Tippi.”

“Oh Emmett, just leave me.”

“That would be mean. I could never be mean to you.”

Tippi struggled with the boots. Just before the goals hit, the boots were off, and she immediately started to shuffle again. As soon as she was close enough, Emmett extended his long arm and pulled her to safety just before the last goal hit the ground. The goals continued to drop and the muffled voices could be heard again, “Get out! We don’t want you here.” Tippi and Emmett ran and ran until they were able to look back and no longer see the seven-foot goals. They both laid down on the orange-black road gulping chunks of air. They didn’t rest for long. They started to hear the voices again. When they looked down the orange-black road, they saw the goals moving closer.

“They are following us,” Tippi shouted.

A cluster of woods was about fifty feet ahead.

“Tippi, we have to make it to that patch of woods.”

“Emmett, I can’t. My feet are so tired. I have no shoes.”

“You have to. Now go!”

Tippi started to run. Emmett deliberately stayed behind her, but the goals were getting closer. When Emmett realized they were not going to make it, he stopped and turned to face the goals. To his surprise there were only two of them.

“Tippi, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Can you guard man-to-man?”

“Yes, but they are much taller than us.”

“We will use that to our advantage. It’s the perfect mismatch. When they get close and start to drop, run behind them. Got it.”

“OK.”

Sure enough when the goals got closer and started to bend, Tippi and Emmett ran behind them. When the goals turned to face them, they would run to the front again. They twisted and twisted the goals until they were so tight they looked like twisted braids ready to pop and uncoil. Tippi and Emmett stood back and watch as the goals burst into little splinters ending up in a huge pile of wood ash.

Tippi and Emmet ran into the woods and didn’t stop until they came to a clearing. Tippi had to rest. She had lost her boots. When she removed her socks, her feet were scarred and bloody from the wood splinters. They spotted a pond and went over so Tippi could put her feet into the water.

Then they heard voices.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FAST BREAK

They heard balls bouncing and cheerleaders cheering. Tippi thought about home: the game, her mother and father, her grandmother and her little brother. Would she ever see them again? They walked through a small patch of woods until they came upon the voices. They saw a basketball court with benches on each side. On the right side was a banner that read Chained-Cross Crusaders. There were twelve children on that side. They wore wristbands made of rock crosses with pointed edges. The twelve children on the left side were standing under a banner that read Good-Garlic Groupies. Their headbands were made of garlic, and they wore shirts that looked like nets. The children varied in ages. Some seem to be as young as six, while others seem to be as old as sixteen or seventeen. Some were tall. Some were short. Some were round. Some were slim. But they all had one thing in common; they all had their hair in dreadlocks. There were black dreads, blonde dreads, brown dreads and even red dreads. When the children saw Tippi and Emmett, one of the Chained-Cross Crusaders shouted, "I want the girl on my team." The Good-Garlic Groupies shouted, "We'll take the boy." Tippi started to run over to play, but Emmett didn't move.

"What's wrong?" Tippi asked.

"I can dribble, but I can't shoot. My father says I need to develop a sweet jump shot."

Tippi looked up at Emmett. He looked so sad, and he looked like an older version of her little brother. She didn't want to be mean to him. She only wanted to help him.

"I'm sure you can learn." Tippi said.

"That's why I'm here. I was told the ZearnMaster could teach me the perfect jump shot."

"Oh, she can. She's wonderful!" One of the good-garlic groupies shouted.

"She can teach you anything." One of the chained-cross crusaders yelled.

Several voices started to sing the ZearnMaster's praises.

"She taught me how to play defense."

"She taught me how to throw a football."

"She taught me how to set a pic."

Then the leader of both groups spoke. She was tall and awfully pretty. Her light brown dreads were the perfect compliment to her tanned skin. She had shiny, white teeth that eased through her perfectly formed pink lips. Her name was Referina. She was taller than the other children, and she also looked older, maybe sixteen. Her voice seemed to be in transition from childhood to adolescence. So sometimes it squeaked and other times it was perfectly smooth. She told Tippi and Emmett that the ZearnMaster loved helping children to learn. Her mantra is *Never give up on a child*. Referina told them that at one time all of the groupies had been to the ZearnMaster for help. However, once they completed their training, they decided to stay and protect the road to the Land of Zearn.

"From the Frightening-Fang family?" Tippi asked.

"Why are they so mean?" Emmett added.

“They hate the ZearnMaster. So they try to stop children traveling on the road to Zearn.

“Why?” Tippi and Emmett asked at the same time.

“Because, the ZearnMaster sided against them, you see, she is a member of the Fang family. She is their sister.”

Tippi and Emmett’s round, brown eyes grew larger, and they both held their breath.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TIME OUT

“A long time ago a small child came to the Zearn family for help. Because he was different, the other brothers and sister...”

“How many brothers and sisters are there?” Emmett and Tippi asked.

“Oh, there are six children in the Fang family. Centeria, the oldest, she was once the most beautiful woman in Zearnville. Then there are the quadruplets, all boys. Of course, they were so handsome all the ladies of Zearnville competed for their attention. And then, there is the youngest, the ZearnMaster. Her beauty and wisdom surpassed all her siblings,” Referina replied.

“Do they have a mother and father?” asked Tippi.

“Oh yes, they were so nice. They ruled the kingdom of Zearn with love and kindness for five hundred years. But they grew old and died, leaving the kingdom in the hands of their oldest child, Centeria.”

Referina voice became sad as she continued the story.

“Centeria and her four brothers were not as nice as their mother and father. However, the youngest child, Thea-Sixmon, did not go along with their nasty ways. She believed in ruling with love and kindness like her mother and father. So, when the brothers and Centeria refused to help the child, Thea-Sixmon came to the child’s aid. She said all children must be helped no matter how different they are.

“One night, when Thea-Sixmon was sleeping, the brothers and Centeria took the child far from the city. They had planned to leave him to die a lonely death in a damp, musky cave. However Llabteksab, the child’s name, had been sent from the sports gods to test the Zearn family. He was sent to make sure the Fang children were following the legacy of their parents. But what he found was jealousy and evil.

Llabteksab raised his hands and a bolt of blinding light struck the Fangs, paralyzing them. He told them that no longer will the name Fang be associated with joy, kindness and beauty. The name would symbolize fear and be associated with carnivores.

Thea- Sixmon had awoken during the night and discovered her sister, her brothers and the child were gone. Because Thea-Sixmon had seen the evil ways her siblings treated the child, she had given him gold pennies to drop if he was ever taken away. Thereby, she traced their path to the cave. Just as the child was about to cast a spell on Centeria and her brothers, Thea-Sixmon arrived. Even though she knew her siblings were wrong, she still begged for their lives.

‘No, Llabteksab please spare my siblings. They are sorry for their wrong doings.’

‘They must be taught a lesson, Thea.’

‘Please, there must be something that can be done?’

Llabteksab, who was tall and thick with such a full mane of black hair it seemed to push his head directly into his shoulders, removed his shoes.

‘Take these shoes. Someone will come who will be able to restore peace to Zearnville. The shoes will be the key.’

He then cast a spell on the brothers and Centeria. He gave them fangs, made them Nightwalkers and cast them from the Land of Zearn. They would never be able to see the

beauty of Zearn again. The child then bestowed the title of ZearnMaster on Thea-Sixmon, and she has been ruling the Kingdom ever since.”

“Wow,” Tippi and Emmett said.

“Now, it’s getting dark,” Referina said. “You must hurry to the next set of pine trees. Take these sunglasses. You will need them later,”

“You gave me three,” Emmett said.

“The ZearnMaster said to give you three.”

“She knows about us?” Tippi asked.

“Yes, she knows you are coming.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DOUBLE DRIBBLE

The smallest of the groupies said, "Wait! Tippi, you need shoes."

"Oh, I had forgotten. I do need shoes." Tippi mouthed the words "Thank-you" to the small groupie.

"Dribbler, get the shoes for Tippi." Referina said to the small groupie.

Dribbler disappeared behind the bleachers and quickly returned with a white shoebox. He sat the box at Tippi's feet. When she opened the box every one of the groupies gasped. Tippi and Emmett were also in awe of the shoes. They had never seen sneakers like these. They were black with white trimming around the foot. Instead of laces the shoes had white zippers on each side of the ankle. Tippi prayed they would fit.

The groupies started to whisper. "Do you think they will fit?"

Tippi gawked at the shoes. She had never wanted anything more in her life. *What if they don't fit?* She thought. *What if my feet are too fat, too long, too short?* She gazed at Emmett, asking him the same question with her eyes. *What if they don't fit?* She slipped her foot into the right shoe. It was easy, too easy.

"They are too big," she said with a sullen face.

"Wait," said Dribbler. He ran back behind the bleachers and returned with a pair of white ankle socks.

"Put these on and try again," Dribbler stated.

Tippi was eager to try again. She wanted the shoes desperately. She put on the socks, looked over at Emmett for encouragement, and stuffed her feet into the black and white, side zip athletic shoes. She stood up and did a few parallel jumps. Then she smiled. The widest smile her mouth would allow.

Dribbler shouted. "They fit! They fit! I knew they would fit."

All the groupies started to cheer and chant. "Tippi and Emmett, Tippi and Emmett."

Referina reminded them that it was getting dark. "You must get to the pine trees before it gets dark. Go now."

Tippi and Emmett hurried to the next set of pine trees.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ASSIST

Tippi and Emmett hurried along the orange-black road until they saw the row of pine trees. They raced each other to the trees and laughed and giggled about the new friends they had made and the unique athletic shoes.

Emmett heard a sound. “Listen.” He peeped from behind the tree and saw a girl in a cheerleader’s uniform sitting on the road, crying.

“She has to get off the road. It’s dark; the frightening-Fang-family will eat her. I’ve got to help her.”

“No, Emmett, the Fang family will eat you too.”

Emmett ran to the road to get the crying cheerleader. The ground started to shake.

“What’s your name?”

“Madisyn.”

“Madisyn, come with me, hurry.”

But it was too late. A member of the Fang family stood over them. His red eyes glowed and his mouth opened and revealed his sharp fangs. However, before he could hurt Emmett and Madisyn the groupies appeared.

The Good-Garlic-Groupies removed their garlic headbands, wrapped them in their shirt nets, and threw them into the hair of the Fang. The Chained-Cross Crusaders removed their rock crosses and threw them into the Fang’s flesh. Then Referina showed

her shiny white teeth. Patches of light pierced the Fang making him rant and rave incoherent fragments of speech.

Referina shouted to Emmett and Madisyn. “Get behind the pine tree, and don’t come out before sunrise.”

The Fang flung his arms, reaching and grabbing for anything in his path. The groupies started to retreat, but Dribbler was too slow. The Fang reached down, grabbed Dribbler and ran into the darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SUBSTITUTION

“Madisyn?”

“Tippi?”

The girls hugged and jumped and laughed and hugged and jumped and laughed until their stomachs were sore and their feet were tired.

“Where are we?” Madisyn asked.

“In the land of Zearn.”

“How, what, where? And who is this?” She asked and looked at Emmett.

“His name is Emmett.”

“Your brother?”

Tippi pulled Madisyn aside. “Yes, I think it’s him but older. All I really know is that we have to trust him.”

“Well, he is cute.”

That night Tippi, Emmett, and Madisyn talked for hours and hours. He told them how he got on the road to Zearn. His father had told him about a magical place where kids come to learn how to be great athletes.

“There are only two ways to get here. You have to be caught up in a whirlwind and spun around and around.”

“That’s what happened to me.” Tippi cried.

“And me too,” cried Madisyn. Madisyn told them how she had gotten caught in a

windstorm at cheerleading camp and ended up on the road where they found her. But she was glad she was here. She desperately wanted to be a cheerleader, but she couldn't jump. She needed the ZearnMaster to teach her to jump very high.

“What's the other way to get here, Emmett?” Tippi asked.

“Well, you have to be told the story by someone whose been here before. That's how I got here. My father came when he was a little boy. He told me all about the ZearnMaster, the protective pine trees and the Frightening-Fang family.”

“What's so special about the pine trees?” Tippi asked.

“Well, my father says the smell is repulsive to the Fangs, and pine wood was some of the first used to build basketball goals.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SECOND QUARTER

Centeria Fang stomped through the cave located twenty miles to the south of Zearnville. She and her four brothers had made their living quarters deep within the cave to avoid the streams of light that run throughout it during the day. Centeria was a big woman, and she was strong, stronger than her brothers were. She was round and tall, almost seven feet. Everything on Centeria looked as if it would pop and send chunks of flesh flying into the darkest of the cave. Her ashy, bare feet, with twelve toes instead of ten, hit the ground so hard the vibrations traveled down the slimy green pathway and woke her four brothers: FourwardOne, FourwardTwo, GuardoOne and GuardoTwo. Unlike Centeria, the brothers shared a meager, box-shaped clearing located deep within the mouth of the cave. The four brothers, all well over six feet, pulled the covers over their heads trying to ignore Centeria's early dusk ranting.

Centeria's private section in the cave was drab and dingy. However, Centeria was too full of hate to notice the melancholy. Her section was perfectly round. In one area she had fang teeth that curved into hooks that hung on the wall. There were seven purple basketball jerseys hanging from each hook. Directly underneath each jersey were seven additional hooks with white shorts that had purple strips on each side. On the floor, underneath each uniform, Centeria had seven pairs of purple high-top sneakers with her name written on each side in a dirty gold glitter. In the center of the circle was her four-post bed. Only the posts are made of bendable benches that Centeria squats on during the

day in order to study the maps that covered all parts of her wall, except the portion with the uniforms. The walls were covered with maps outlining the city of Zearnville. She desperately wanted to find a way into the city and claim her rightful seat on the throne. Centeria's thoughts were on one thing as she scoured through the maps.

I've got to find a way into Zearn. I will overthrow that do-gooder sister of mine, and then I will take my rightful place as leader of Zearnville. I will be ZearnMaster of Zearnville. She tore one map after another down from the wall and stomped upon them until she was exhausted from the thoughts of hate that traveled from her brain to her feet making them stomp even harder. She was looking for the latest map, number 252.

"Where is it? Where is it?" Centeria spat the words out of her mouth. She placed her hand on the post-bench and slammed it into the floor with one push. Then she picked up the post-bench to move it closer to the maps, moving the entire bed with ease. She did this ritual every night so that the bed made a full circle. In the morning it faced the east, and in the evening it faced the west.

"Yes, this may work." Finding map 252, she tore it from the wall and stomped her way to her brothers' section of the cave. She mumbled to herself as she walked the slimy green hallway.

Once I regain the throne, I will throw that do-gooder out of the kingdom. I will make all the children work hard day and night. And there will be no more basketball. I will ban all balls from the land. Centeria pushed back thick, dirty brown drapes that covered the entrance to the brothers' room.

"Wake up. Wake up. Get up. Get up. We have plotting and scheming to do."

FourwardOne jumped from his twin bed. He was rubbing his eyes, thus forgetting to cover the bruises he received the night before from the fight he had with the groupies.

“What happened to you?” Centeria spies the bruises. “You fool; you let the groupies get you again. I should stomp on you and send you into the daylight. You worthless...”

Centeria took a sniff, and then another, and then another. There was no mistaking what she smelled. It was the stench of garlycros. Centeria nose was especially sensitive to the smell of groupies. They had the stench of garlic mixed with the stink of sweat that lingered on the chained crosses that hang from their necks. There was only one smell like that, garlycros. Only one creature produced that smell, a groupie. Centeria eyes searched the room until they rested upon Dribbler.

“What is this?”

“See, I brought you a groupie. He can lead us into Zearnville.” FourwardOne answered.

Centeria looked to see the scrawny little creature sitting with his knees covering most of his face. He was the smallest groupie she had ever seen. Centeria stomped over to Dribbler. She pulled him up by his swarming blonde dreads.

“Let me go, you big bully. I’m not afraid of you.” His voice said otherwise.

Centeria released him and pushed him back into the corner.

“Eat him. I’ve found my way into Zearn.”

FourwardOne, FourwardTwo, and GuardoTwo started to lick their rubbery lips.

“Wait.” GuardoOne shouted. He was the smallest of the brothers, only six-two. He was kinder than the others were and much smarter than Centeria. GuardoOne

regretted what they did to the other child years ago. He wanted to get back into Zearn, beg his sister's forgiveness, and live peacefully with her in Zearnville. "If we get caught, he can be our leverage," GuardoOne said in an effort to save Dribbler.

"We won't get caught, not this time. Eat him I say."

"Wait, FourwardOne has more. He was telling us about it last night."

"I do? I was?" FourwardOne asked scratching between the patches of hair on his scaly head.

"Yes, the girl, the shoes," GuardoOne whispered to him.

"Oh, yeah. The shoes, they fit the new girl."

Centeria's eyes grow wider. "What did you say?"

"The shoes, they fit the new girl. She is on her way to Zearn."

"Is this true?" She asked the other brothers.

"We were not there." They all answer simultaneously.

Centeria turned her attention to Dribbler. "Groupie is this true?"

"Yes," Dribbler answered timidly.

"Speak up you little runt. I asked you a question. Is this true?"

"Yes, it's true," Dribbler said, gaining a sip of confidence. "She is here! You're doomed. All of you are doomed."

"Shut up. Shut up. Let me think."

Centeria stomped back to her room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN THE PAINT

Tippi, Emmett, and Madisyn awoke to a dazzling sunshine. They decided to walk all day. They didn't stop to play, but no matter how far they walked, they only saw more orange-black road ahead. They each started to feel hopeless. *Maybe there is no Zearn.* *Maybe there is no ZearnMaster.*

Tippi started to wonder if she would ever see her family again. She wondered if her mother, father and grandmother were sad that she was gone. Since she was so mean to her little brother, maybe they were glad she was gone. She missed Emmett, and she swore to the heavens that she would change toward him if she could only go back home. All he ever wanted was to be in charge sometimes and be her friend, much like this new Emmett. She really liked him. He looked just like the future picture of her brother. She trusted him. He was in charge. He was her friend. She thought about the Feenys. She had to admit she missed them too. Maybe they were caught up in this strange land also. How could she miss Madisyn? She was right here with her. Tippi was in a strange land, but she had her two best friends. If she had to be away from her family, she was glad she was with Emmett and Madisyn.

"Well, I think we should rest," Emmett said bringing Tippi out of her deep thoughts.

Tippi, Emmett and Madisyn left the road and sat under the shy of a massive oak tree. They ate fruits and nuts, and one-by-one they fell asleep under the hypnotic breeze

of the oak tree. Hours later Emmett awoke to piercing stings in his face. He saw little people, no more than ten inches tall. They were all dressed in rust-colored unitards. They each carried brown spears that looked like miniature toothpicks. In a minuscule amount of time, they had covered Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn's bodies. They poked Emmett with the miniature toothpicks. "Stop!" He shouted, waking Tippi and Madisyn. When Tippi, Emmett and Madisyn tried to stand, they couldn't. They were covered with nets from their feet to their shoulders.

"Who are you people? Why are we caught in these nets?" Emmett asked.

"We are the Pee-Wees, and you are our enemy."

"We don't even know you. Why are we your enemy?" Tippi inquired.

"You have destroyed our village."

"No we didn't," Tippi said.

"We would never do that," Madisyn added.

"You did," said one of the Pee-Wees. She must have been the leader because her unitard was white and her spear was a glistening black color. They called her Assista.

"How did we do this?" Emmett asked.

"You sat your big, round bottoms on it. Now there is nothing left," Assista replied.

"But we didn't know," Emmett pleaded.

"We are tired of you giant children destroying our villages. Year after year the giants come on their way to Zearn and sit their enormous bottoms on our village."

"But we didn't know," Emmett repeated.

“It doesn’t matter. We are tired. Someone must pay. We must teach you giant children a lesson. We will leave you for the Fang family.”

“You can’t leave us,” Emmett was trying to think of a way to save their lives.

“Please, please release us. If, if, you release us, we, we, we, will help you rebuild your village.”

“We will rebuild somewhere else.”

“No, No, um, um why leave this beautiful spot. Um, um we can make a sign forbidding anyone to rest under this oak tree.”

“We tried that. It didn’t work. The giants didn’t even see the sign. It was destroyed under the weight of their big bottoms.” The Pee-Wees started to retreat.

“Wait! Um, um you can build your village in the tree. That way no one can destroy it again. Your people are great climbers. I noticed how quickly you guys covered our bodies. Release us and we will help you build a brand new village on a branch of the oak tree.”

Assista seemed to consider the idea. She spoke with the other Pee-Wees. It was hard to hear as their squeaky voices traveled up and down Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn’s bodies. After a few moments, Assista spoke.

“It appears you giant children have come up with a great idea. We have decided to release you.”

They removed the nets from Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn.

“Thank you, we will keep our promise. We will come back tomorrow and help you build your village,” said Emmett.

“No.” The Pee-Wees bent their knees in a defensive stance and pointed their spears at Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn. “You will help us now, just as you promised.”

“It is too late. It will be dark soon. We must protect ourselves from the Fang Family,” Emmett pleaded.

“No, you must help us as you promised. Attack! Attack!” Assista yelled.

They began to throw their spears at Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn. They could feel the stings all over their bodies.”

“Ok, Ok, we will help you,” Emmett shouted.

In one hour they were able to build an entire village. Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn gathered tiny twigs and handed them to the Pee-Wees who had selected a muscular branch on the oak tree to build their village. They built homes, schools, churches, playgrounds and stores. When they finished, dusk was setting. There was no time for Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn to make it to the protective pine trees.

“We will help you,” said the Pee-Wees.

“But you are so little,” Madisyn stated.

“Do not judge us by our size. It is what is in the heart that matters.”

The Pee-Wees took Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn to a clearing behind the oak tree. The clearing was shaped like a U, and it was painted red. The Pee-Wees told the giant children to stay in the paint, and they would send friends to help them.

Darkness fell upon the U. Madisyn began to panic. Just as she was about to leave the paint, a giant Hawk swooped down and snatched Madisyn. Emmett and Tippi watched in shock as the bird took Madisyn into the night sky. Before shock released their tongues, another Hawk swooped down and snatched Tippi. Emmett could only watch as

she also disappeared into the night sky. Emmett was alone. He heard the howls of the Fang Family. They were getting closer and closer. He heard a rustling in the branches. He hoped it was the Pee-Wees, but it wasn't. It was a Fang. Their eyes locked. Emmett's dark brown circles peered into the deep red irises of the Fang.

"Is there something there for us to eat?" Emmett heard another member of the Fang family call from inside the bushes.

"No, don't bother to come in here. There is nothing to eat."

As the Fang started to move closer to Emmett, a third giant Hawk swooped down from the sky, snatched Emmett and disappeared in the night sky.

Emmett held on tight as he soared through the night sky. He enjoyed the briskness of the night air flowing through his clothes. He also enjoyed gliding through the air. It felt like leaving the free throw line and flying to the net for a slam-dunk. Emmett was enjoying his ride so much, that he was almost disappointed when the Hawk landed beneath a patch of pine trees. Emmett saw Tippi and Madisyn waiting for him. Beside them were Assista and several of the Pee-Wees. Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn embraced. Then they turned to face the Pee-Wees and the mammoth Hawks.

"Do not be afraid. These are our friends, the HawkEyes. They will not harm you. You are safe now. We have kept our promise."

Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn thanked the Pee- Wees for helping them.

"You are welcome my friends. Rest tonight, you will reach Zearn tomorrow. If you need us again, call. We are your friends for life."

The Pee-Wees climbed on the back of the HawkEyes and disappeared into the night sky.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RUN THE PLAY

In the morning Emmett, Tippi, and Madisyn didn't tarry. They were determined to get to Zearn before another night fell. After walking approximately half a mile, in the distance, they could see a backboard. As they got closer, it became so bright. It was almost blinding. They remembered the sunglasses the groupies had given them. They put them on and "Welcome to the Land of Zearn" appeared before their eyes.

Madisyn tried to do a toe touch. Tippi slid her feet in a backward motion doing a dance called the moonwalk. Emmett bent his knees and twirled his legs in a circle. The trio was so excited. Finally, they would get to see the ZearnMaster. Finally, their wishes would be granted. Emmett would get his sweet jump shot. Tippi would get to go back home, and Madisyn would learn to jump high.

They ran and ran until they stood before a steep set of eight steps that led up to the backboard. Each climbed the steps which ended at the top of a net attached to the backboard. Just above the net, was an arrow that pointed to the words "enter here!" There was no hesitation. They were too close to turn back. They held hands and all three jumped through the net. Each laughed and giggled as they slid down a long bench and landed in the Land of Zearn.

Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn had lost their sunglasses during the bench slide. But, it didn't matter. Their eyes quickly adjusted to the beauty of Zearn. It was absolute splendor. The sky was the brightest of blue. It shined down on white rooftops and then

slipped onto silvery walkways. There were movie theaters, bicycles, and game arcades. The buildings were on long stems that bubbled out at the top similar to lollipops. There was a candy shop with walls made of golden brown caramel. There was an ice cream shop with walls made of cones that you simply pulled and filled with any flavor you wanted. Tables and chairs were made out of cookies: chocolate chip, macaroon, and crème filled. There were football stadiums, soccer fields, basketball courts, frilly dresses and cheerleading uniforms for the girly girls. Boys and girls of every nationality lived there: Africans, Americans, Indians, Japanese and Germans. And they were all cheering for Emmett, Tippi, and Madisyn. They all chanted. “You made it. We knew you would. We’re so happy to see you. The ZearnMaster is waiting for you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HALF TIME

The ZearnMaster's house, at the edge of the kingdom, was round like a small arena. Emmett, Tippi and Madisyn entered through the double glass doors at the front of the house. Stepping inside the ZearnMaster's home was like stepping inside a sports dream fantasy. The ceiling was at least twenty feet high. The floor was a glossy brown hardwood with Zearnville written on it. The walls were lined with pictures of children the ZearnMaster had helped. Tippi and Emmett saw a picture of their father; however, neither said anything to the other. There were pictures of Ervin Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Lisa Leslie, Peyton Manning and the William sisters, Venus and Serena. There were pictures of college greats like Emmett Thomas and Chris Lollar. There was even a picture of James Naismith receiving the instructions from the ZearnMaster. The children were so busy running from one picture to another and announcing the names; they did not realize the ZearnMaster had entered the room.

"What is your desire?" She asked.

They turned to see the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. She wasn't the classic young beauty in all the storybooks. She was the older beauty that came with knowledge and wisdom like that of a wise grandmother. When she smiled, her jaws arched to form the perfect frame for her full pink lips. The creamy-beige walls of the house blended so beautifully with the ZearnMaster's deep, brown skin. Her thick, dark

braids almost hung to the floor. Her gold gown gently pulled in the light from the creamy-beige room and made her glow like a star in the Milky Way.

“Well, looks like I will have to ask again. What is your desire?”

Emmett was the first to find his voice and reply: “I want to learn the perfect jump shot, Ms. ZearnMaster.” Then he extended his elbow to nudge Madisyn who was standing beside him.

“I want to jump very high, Ms. ZearnMaster,” Madisyn said.

“I just want to go home. I’m sure my family misses me. I’ve been gone an awful long time,” Tippi said.

“Ah but Tippi, time in Zearnville is much shorter than time in your world. You have only been away for a few hours. Nevertheless, your family is worried.

“Is there something else you seek Tippi?” The ZearnMaster asked.

“I just want my mother and father,” Tippi said. She looked over at Emmett. Then she added, “and my little brother.”

“Continue,” the ZearnMaster said.

“I must learn to be nicer to my little brother.”

“And what about you Madisyn?”

“Me.”

“Yes, you young lady. Are you nice to Tippi’s little brother?”

“No, I’m not. I promise I will be nicer. I really like Emmett. I just didn’t want Tippi to know.”

“But, Madisyn, you told me to be mean if I had a little brother.”

“I know, but I like Emmett. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I love my little brother very much,” Tippi said.

“Well, it seems as if your journey has already taught you many things. We will start on your requests immediately. Oh, and Tippi there is one more thing. The shoes...”

At that exact moment the groupies burst through the front doors of the ZearnMaster’s home.

“Forgive us ZearnMaster,” Referina stated, “but the Fang Family has taken Dribbler.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

RESUME PLAY

“The girl has the shoes.”

Centeria Fang kept repeating this statement aloud over and over again as she walked circles around her four-post bed. She pulled at the ends of her dull, tangled, purple hair and rubbed her scaly hands together. She licked her lips as if she could taste the skin of the young girl. Centeria’s thoughts raced. She reflected upon the child who had come all those years ago. His last words before casting his evil spell upon them making her and her brothers Nightwalkers, repeated in her head.

Another child will come who will wear these shoes
One, two tries it will be
If the purple one does not change her evil ways
The child and her brother will defeat thee

When the child leaves Zearn
The purple one will fly through the air
And be dropped in a place
That will bring utter despair

She will walk but never see the end
She will thirst but never quench
She will look but never see
She will long to go back from whence

But once she leaves
She will never return
And Peace will reign in Zearn
For many years to come

The child took off his shoes, a pair of black sneakers with white trimming around the foot and white zippers on each side of the ankle. He placed them in the hands of Thea-Sixmon. Then he bestowed on her the title of ZearnMaster and escorted her back to Zearnville, leaving the others to live in the dingy cave.

Now his prophesy had come true, she is here. Well there is one flaw in this prophesy. THE CHILD HAS TO LEAVE ZEARN. So, it's simple. I will not let her leave. I will keep this child forever. She will never leave Zearn. As long as I have the child and the shoes under my control, I will rule Zearn. I know this will be my ticket back into Zearnville. Now I must think of a way to lure her to the cave.

CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

THIRD QUARTER

“How did this happen?” The ZearnMaster snapped her words at Referina.

Referina told the ZearnMaster of how the Fang tried to attack Emmett and Madisyn on the road to Zearn.

“We were trying to protect the children. Dribbler got too close.”

“You know Dribbler was not to go along on any missions. He still needs training.”

“I know ZearnMaster, but Dribbler is so stubborn.”

“Yes, I know. I should have kept him here at Zearnville until he was ready. But he was so eager to be the first to find the special child. Don’t worry Referina. We will get him back. You did right to come to me. Which one of my brothers was it?”

“I’m pretty sure it was FourwardOne, ZearnMaster.

“He will surely take the boy back to the cave,” the ZearnMaster said thinking aloud.

Tippi, Emmett, and Madisyn, who had all been quiet up to this point, said simultaneously. “The cave?”

The ZearnMaster and Referina could see the fear in the children’s eyes. So, they tried to answer in a calming voice.

“Yes, the Fang family lives in a cave to the south of Zearnville,” Referina answered.

“Oh, poor Dribbler,” Tippi stated. “He was so nice to me. He gave me the shoes.”

“Yes, he is so small. Will they harm him?” Madisyn added.

The ZearnMaster cast her brown eyes on the children. There was a look of worry on her face, but the words that came out of her mouth did not reflect her look.

“Don’t worry, we will get him back.”

“Can we help?” Emmett asked

“Yes, but it may delay your requests.”

“I am willing to wait.” Emmett looked at Tippi and Madisyn wanting them to buy into his heroism.

“I don’t know. I want to see my family so badly. I really miss them. But, Dribbler did give me these special shoes, and I love them so much,” Tippi said. “What should I do ZearnMaster?” she asked.

“The choice must be yours, Tippi.”

Tippi looked around at her new world. This place was perfect. She loved her new friends, the Pee-Wees, the Hawkeyes, and the groupies. She really loved this new Emmett and she had her best friend, Madisyn, with her. But she still missed home. She looked at the ZearnMaster not sure what she was going to say. The words, “I, I want to go home,” spilled from her mouth.

“Then I will grant your wish.”

“But ZearnMaster,” Referina cried.

The ZearnMaster looked sternly at Referina; then she stated.

“It must be her choice.”

Suddenly they became aware of loud gathering of voices outside the ZearnMaster's home. Then they each jumped when a tumultuous crash opened the doors and through came one of the Hawkeyes with Assista riding his back.

"ZearnMaster we intercepted one of the Fangs outside the doors of Zearnville. He had this package," Assista stated.

Assista handed the package to the ZearnMaster. It was a purple box and the lid lifted with little resistance. The ZearnMaster gasped as she pulled out a long blonde dread. Then she pulled out a note and read it silently.

Hello, my dear sweet sister.

If you want to see your little groupie again, bring me the girl and the shoes. Oh, and hurry, the smell of garlycros is making me hungry.

Tippi along with everyone else couldn't help but notice the concerned look on the ZearnMaster's face, and the sight of Dribbler's dread made her worry for him escalate.

"I will stay and help Dribbler, ZearnMaster," Tippi said.

"Madisyn, will you stay? Dribbler did get caught because he was helping us," Emmett asked.

"Yes, yes, of course I want to help, but I am afraid."

"We all are," Tippi added.

CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

IN TRANSITION

Tippi, Emmett and Madisyn were given free reign of Zearnville for the rest of the day. They decided to visit Zearnville's Amusement Park. They were so excited about the rides. They temporarily forgot about the journey they would be taking first thing tomorrow morning.

There was the football-field-goal ride. Tippi, Emmett, and Madisyn sat in a pod shaped like a football. A huge mechanical foot kicked the pod, and it flew high into the air right through the center of two parallel bars and landed on the other side.

Next they raced to the baseball field. They rode the homerun-slide. They were each placed in a separated cage in a standing position at home plate. An announcer stated, "It looks like a home run." The cage took off at an accelerated speed to first base. "The ball is still in the air," the announcer continued. The cage moved to second base. "Looks like the ball is going to land inside the field. Can the outfielder catch it? The runner is going to try for third." The cage raced to third base. "Oh no, the outfielder dropped the ball. The runner is going to try to make it to home plate." The cage took off to home plate. "What a throw! The outfielder throws the ball to the infielder. The ball is on its way to home plate. Can the runner make it? I don't know. This is going to be close. He may have to slide." Immediately the cage dropped parallel to the ground and started to slide to home plate. "Safe. What a play!"

"That was too much fun," Tippi shouted.

“What a rush!” Emmett stated.

“I have a headache,” Madisyn said. “Ok, my turn. The cheerleading section is next,” Madisyn added.

Madisyn eyes bubbled in amazement at Cheerleading World. Tippi and Emmett watched as Madisyn spent nearly an hour in the virtual jumps arcade. In this world Madisyn was able to do toe touches, tucks, spread eagles, and straights with ease. Her confidence grew and grew. She was able to jump higher than anyone on her cheerleading squad. She knew this because she had studied their jumps over and over again.

“Madisyn, that’s enough,” Tippi shouted.

“Just one more toe touch.”

“No, it’s time for Basketball World.”

“I’m all for that,” Emmett added.

In Basketball World Tippi and Emmett were in heaven. The rides were awesome. There were the break away slam-dunk, the nothing-but-net and the trip-to-the-concession-stand rides. Madisyn enjoyed the trip-to-the-concession-stand ride. This ride lifted you from a front row seat to the concession stand where you had five seconds to grab as much food as you could before being returned to your seat. Madisyn sat and ate popcorn, Twizzlers and drunk soda, while Tippi and Emmett played the virtual games.

Emmett perfected his jump shot. He was able to hit fifty jump shots in a row. No misses! The voice inside the game told him, “Raise the ball 6.25 inches above your head. Point your body at a right degree angle. Fully extend your arms. When you jump flick your wrist and follow through. ” All these tips made Emmett the perfect jump shooter.

Tippi worked on her slam-dunk. The voice inside the machine told her to, “Keep your eyes on the goal. Don’t look down at the ball. Start your dribble from half-court. When you get inside the free throw line, jump with explosion to the basket. Then throw it down big girl, throw it down.” Tippi was able to dunk with ease.

On the way back to the ZearnMaster’s home, all the other children cheered and told them they were so proud that they were staying to help a teammate in trouble.

That night each child slept in a private room. Emmett thought of his sister. For once she let him be in charge. She trusted him. He wondered if she would be the same when they returned home. He had to let her figure things out for herself. That was part of the deal he made in order to come to Zearnville.

Madisyn thought of her parents. She wanted to see them but for some reason she felt compelled to save Dribbler before she could go back home. She couldn’t leave until she knew he was safe.

Tippi thought of her family. She wondered if they were crying for her. She didn’t want her brother to grow up without her. She wanted so much to tell him how much she loved him. “As soon as Dribbler is safe, I will go home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY - THREE

COAST TO COAST

Early Sunday morning Tippi, Emmett, Madisyn, Referina and The ZearnMaster set out to find the Fang Family. They left Zearnville on the south end of the city. When the massive, wooden, double doors opened, fear immediately wrapped itself around the bodies of Tippi, Emmett, and Madisyn.

“Do not be afraid. I will protect you,” the ZearnMaster said.

Their eyes inhaled the sinister backyard of Zearnville. The trees were a sad sight. Their branches hung and sagged like thick mucous leaving the hollows of the nose. The trunks looked like plump, round boils ready to pop and spill their bowels. Their feet stepped onto an old, lumpy, dirt road that snaked into the wilderness. They each put one foot in front of the other, stepping on deflated basketballs, footballs, and soccer balls until they were far enough to hear the doors of Zearnville slam shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

FOURTH QUARTER

Centerina Fang stomped into her brothers' room and watched as they slumped around the cave. FourwardOne, FourwardTwo, and GuardoTwo lay upon the floor with their protruding stomachs and giant warped feet blocking most of their other limbs. The groupie pretended to sleep in his corner. His blonde dreads almost covered his entire body. GuardoOne sat close to the child. Although his stomach and feet were not as large as his brothers were, he was still a disgusting sight to see. Centerina hated her brothers; they were timid and weak. They thought they would follow her into Zearnville. But once she took over the kingdom, she would band them to an eternal life as Nightwalkers.

She turned her attention back to the groupie. He had started to get bold, running his mouth about the girl, and about the shoes, and about how she would be defeated. *Well, we will see about that. My sister and the others should be on their way to try to save the little runt.*

"I want the girl. I do not care about the others," Centeria shouted, jolting her brothers from their lackadaisical mood. "Go out to the road and bring me the girl."

"What about the boy?" GuardoTwo asked pointing to Dribbler.

"Once I have the girl, you can do what you want with him," FourwardOne, FourwardTwo, and GuardoTwo eyes savored as they traveled to the young boy in the corner.

"I will go," GuardoOne stated.

Dribbler, turned to look at GuardoOne. His eyes were pleading for protection. GuardoOne whispered to Dribbler. "You will be safe. They will not harm you until they have the girl."

"You cannot harm her," Dribbler stated.

"Don't worry. I will bring her back safely."

CHAPTER TWENTY - FIVE

CROSSOVER

The ZearnMaster led the way down the long, crooked road. Behind her was Emmett, Tippi, Madisyn and Referina at the rear. The further they got into the forest, the eerier the place became. Low, whispering voices started to sail into the ears of the travelers.

“You must look straight ahead. Do not look to the right or left,” the ZearnMaster stated. “The creatures can only attack if you make eye contact with them. No matter what you hear, do not look in their direction.”

“I want my family. I miss them so much. I want to see my little brother.”

“Do not think aloud, Tippi. They will use your thoughts to trick you.”

“Tippi, can I be in charge?” Tippi heard her little brother’s voice.

“That’s my little brother. That’s Emmett!”

“No it’s not, Tippi. Don’t look.”

But it was too late. Tippi looked in the direction of the voices thus inviting the creatures to attack. They were so fast. You could not tell what they looked like, but you could smell them. The smell was like sulfur. Burning the children eyes so that they could not see.

The ZearnMaster grabbed the children and pressed them into her body shielding their eyes from the smell. The creatures continued to attack the ZearnMaster and the

children but did not touch Referina. “Referina, something you have must repel the creatures. Wrap your arms around the children. I will lead the creatures away.”

“No, ZearnMaster, we must not separate,” Referina replied.

“ZearnMaster, something is coming,” Referina shouted.

The travelers heard a loud pouncing that made the ground shake. They looked up to see a Fang coming full speed at them. The Fang circled the travelers sprinkling them with a clear, watery liquid. The creatures made a choking sound and retreated into the dense forest.

“Hello my sister,” GuardoOne said. His voice was nothing like the creature that stood before them. The voice was smooth and chivalrous. However, his physique was that of perfect deformity. His ears were round with sprouts of wiry hair protruding from them. His brown, yellow and green teeth extended from his rubbery purple lips. The skin on his arms hung loosely from his flesh. His warped feet, protruding stomach and patches of sooty hair all added to the disgusting sight.

The ZearnMaster pushed the children behind her and Referina. Referina seemed disgusted with the creature but the ZearnMaster looked upon him with sympathy.

“Hello GuardoOne.”

“Don’t worry. I am not here to harm you or your guests.”

Still the ZearnMaster kept the children behind her and Referina.

“Why should I believe you?”

“You shouldn’t. But I tell the truth.”

The children peeped at the creature from behind the safety of Referina and the ZearnMaster.

“What is that?” She pointed to the liquid he used to banish the creatures.

“Garlycros, the creatures hate the smell of garlycos just as much as your sister, Centeria. You are safe now. They will not return.”

“Why did you help us?”

“I have no malice for you my sister. Truly, I have missed you and Zearnville. I have wanted to come back home for many years.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Would you have accepted me?”

“If you came with a pure heart.”

“Then my sister I ask for your forgiveness and for your trust.”

The ZearnMaster studied her brother’s dark eyes. The children and Referina watched as the ZearnMaster dropped her guarded demeanor and embraced her brother. The Fang whispered something into the ZearnMaster’s ear. Then he quickly pushed her away, grabbed Tippi and disappeared into the forest.

CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

FAST BREAK

GuardoOne threw Tippi onto his back and traveled through the woods so fast it was hard for her to keep her eyes opened. The briskness of the wind brought tears to her eyes, but she refused to close them. She had to absorb in all she could, so that she could find her way back to Zearnville. *That's the only way I will get back home.*

GuardoOne stopped his flight just as quickly and effortlessly as when he grabbed Tippi. He removed her from his back and sat her on a fallen tree limb. GuardoOne studied her: her face, her eyes, her hair, and of course the shoes. When he was full, he spoke.

“Do not be afraid of me.”

“I'm not afraid.”

“I see. You are a brave one.”

“I see no evil in your eyes.”

“Indeed, there is not any. I only want what you want and that is to go home.”

“The ZearnMaster will help you. You are her brother. I'm sure she loves you very much.”

GuardoOne extended his hand to Tippi. She put her hand in his, and he quickly put her onto his back again.

“When we get to the cave, you will be greeted by my sister, Centeria. You will be afraid. But I will be there, and I am sure Thea-Sixmon and your other friends will arrive

soon. Whatever you do, do not give Centeria the shoes.” Then as swiftly as he stopped, GuardoOne was back racing through the forest with the brisk wind attacking Tippi’s eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY - SEVEN

OFFICIAL TIME OUT

Madisyn and Referina were frantic after GuardoOne took Tippi.

“Maybe we should go back to Zearnville,” Madisyn said. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“ZearnMaster what are we going to do? As soon as Centeria gets the shoes, she will have no use for the children,” Referina said.

“I think he is the nice one,” Emmett said.

“What?” Referina asked.

“I think he is the nice one. I’m sure he is the one who protected me from the other Fangs when we were stranded in the land of the PeeWees.”

“He is the nice one,” the ZearnMaster added. “He will protect Tippi and Dribbler until we get there, but we must hurry.”

CHAPTER TWENTY - EIGHT

RESUME PLAY

The final four travelers, ZearnMaster, Referina, Emmett and Madisyn arrived at the cave just before dusk. Once they were through the mouth of the cave, thick, wooden poles fell down and locked them inside. The final four were in a large, round area that branched into a narrow passageway. The walls of the opening were a thick, deep, dirty purple with clumps of slimy bubbles protruding. As they were about to walk down the hall, Centeria spoke. "Hello, Thea-Sixmon. Oh excuse me, it's ZearnMaster."

"Show yourself, Centeria," the ZearnMaster responded.

"I am right here."

They turned to look in the direction of the voice, but saw no one. Emmett, Madisyn and Referina voices were fearful as they mumbled among themselves. However, the ZearnMaster remained calm.

"My sister, I am not here for games. Where are the children?"

"You have changed, my sister. There was a time when you enjoyed my games," Centeria jokingly replied.

"That was before you betrayed our mother and father and made the Fang name one of wickedness and distaste."

The ZearnMaster chose her words carefully. She knew any reference to their parents would anger Centeria and make her show herself.

"Our parents were weak. They did not understand how to use power."

And with that Centeria stepped through one of the slimy bubbles and stood directly in front of the ZearnMaster.

Centeria was at least one foot taller. She, with her deep purple attire, and the ZearnMaster, with her perfect gold, were in great contrast to each other.

“I have come for the children,” the ZearnMaster said.

Centeria’s repugnant voice replied. “Follow me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY - NINE

POSSESSION

Bats and owls perched on each side of the slimy, green hallway and watched as the four visitors passed through. Centeria led the way with the ZearnMaster, Emmett, Madisyn and Referina trailing. They traveled for two to three minutes before they came upon another opening, which spilled into a full basketball court with a scorer's table. At half court stood Tippi and Dribbler surrounded by the Fang brothers.

"ZearnMaster, we knew you would come," the children yelled.

"Are you OK?" The ZearnMaster asked.

"Yes, we're fine."

"Let them go, Centeria," the ZearnMaster stated.

"Surely," Centeria calmly replied.

Centeria nodded her head to her brothers. They stood aside and freed the children.

Tippi and Dribbler ran to the comfort of the ZearnMaster.

"What a cozy reunion," Centeria said with sarcasm. "Now, my sister, take the boy and go."

"You know I am not leaving without Tippi."

"Then I welcome you all to my humble abode, because I will never let her go."

CHAPTER THIRTY

FULL-COURT PRESS

“I have an idea,” GuardoOne spoke. “Let’s play for the girl.”

Everyone turned their attention to GuardoOne.

“What do you mean?” Tippi asked.

“Basketball. Let’s play a game of basketball.”

Centeria grunted and started to reach for Tippi. The ZearnMaster stepped in front of the child. GuardoOne continued with his intervention. “You guys must remember our favorite game. As children in Zearnville we played all day and deep into the night. Mother and Father had to make us leave the court.”

“Oh yeah, that was much fun,” FourwardTwo answered.

“Yeah, I remember the time Thea dunked on you, Centeria,” FourwardOne said with a giggle in his voice, and he was immediately smacked in the head by Centeria.

“Ouch!” he said and pouted like a small child.

“That was a freak accident,” Centeria yelled.

The ZearnMaster knew her sister had three weaknesses. The first was any mention of their mother and father. The second was a competitive game of basketball and the third was her greed. So the ZearnMaster answered, “Ok, we will play for the girl.”

“ZearnMaster,” all the children shouted simultaneously. The ZearnMaster turned to the children who were all standing behind her. “You all must trust me. I will get us back to Zearnville.” Then she turned back to her brothers and sister and stated.

“We’re in.”

CHAPTER THIRTY - ONE

END OF REGULATION

“We will play for fifteen minutes,” GuardoOne spoke. “If we win, we get the girl and control of Zearnville. If you win, we will personally escort you back to Zearnville and become your lifelong servants.”

“Let the games begin.”

The words poured from Centeria lumpy mouth with ease. “My sister, to beat you and get the child will be my pleasure.”

The ZearnMaster turned her back to her family and gathered her team into a huddle. “My family will play dirty. Be prepared. Centeria was once the greatest dunker in all of Zearnville. She taught many of the great ones. Do not underestimate her athletic prowess or her evilness. Dribbler, you handle the point.”

“Dribbler! But he is too little.”

“Talent cannot be measured by size, Tippi. Dribbler can handle the point like a pro. Every team needs a great ball handler. You must always trust your teammates. Emmett, you play the off-guard. Referina and I will play the forwards. Madisyn you will watch the clock and cheer us on.”

“ZearnMaster, that leaves me to play center. I can’t...”

“A good ballplayer believes in the tangibles; a great ballplayer believes in the intangibles. I would not give you anything that you cannot handle. You can do this. If we all play team ball, we will be victorious.”

CHAPTER THRITY - TWO

JUMP BALL

The whistle blew. The ball entered the air. The rumble started.

Centeria controlled the tip. She bounced the ball to the north side of the court. She knocked the ZearnMaster and Tippi down and slammed the ball for the first two points.

Emmett controlled the rebound. He passed the ball to Dribbler. Dribbler brought the ball up court. He threw a pass to Tippi. She was stationed under the basket. Tippi went in for the lay-up, but Centeria came from behind and blocked the shot.

FourwardTwo controlled the rebound. He dribbled twice then passed the ball to Centeria. She dribbled down court full speed and dunked again. Two more points for the Fangs. After three minutes the score was ten to nothing. The ZearnMaster called a time out.

“Ok, are we going to play ball, or are we going to continue to let them intimidate us?” She demanded.

The ZearnMaster’s team cast their eyes to the floor to avoid eye contact with their coach.

“I said,” the ZearnMaster’s voice was now a stern mixture of attitude and rigidness, “are we going to play ball or are we going to continue to let them intimidate us?”

When Tippi looked up from the floor, all of her teammates eyes were on her. And for some reason she felt responsible for their fear.

“We’re going to play ball, ZearnMaster,” Tippi whispered.

“What?”

“We’re going to play ball, ZearnMaster,” Tippi shouted.

“What about your teammates?”

Tippi looked at Referina, Dribbler and Emmett, and her eyes demanded a positive response.

“We’re going to play ball, ZearnMaster,” they each replied.

With that answer, the ZearnMaster removed a rubber band from her wrist. She pulled her lengthy braids into a thick ponytail and resumed coaching.

“All right, defense is the key. They are bigger, but they are not smarter. Tippi you must keep the ball out of Centeria’s hands. Remember, we are the defenders of Zearnville. Now, on three we all say defense, and we play to win.”

“One, Two, Three, defense!”

CHAPTER THIRTY - THREE

OVERTIME

Emmett inbounded the ball to Dribbler. Dribbler brought the ball up court. He passed to Emmett. He tried to shoot but GuardoTwo was too close. He passed back to Dribbler. Dribbler passed to Referina. She tried to get the ball to Tippi but couldn't because of Centeria's massive frame. Referina passed the ball to the ZearnMaster who drove past FourwardOne then kicked the ball back out to Emmett. He was stationed at the three-point line. He caught the ball and shot it: Swish, three points. The Zearnville Defenders were on the board.

Madisyn yelled from the scorer's table.

Emmett, Emmett is a hoot.
He can dribble,
and he can shoot.

Centeria controlled the rebound. She passed the ball to GuardoOne. He started up court. Dribbler took a defensive stance and waited for GuardoOne at half court. When Dribbler moved up to defend, GuardoOne crossed-over from left to right. Dribbler intercepted the crossover and started to dribble up court. He passed the ball to the ZearnMaster who was running along side him. She completed an easy lay-up.

Madisyn yelled. "Yeah, now we got us a game. The Fangs 10, the Zearnville Defenders 5."

GuardoOne brought the ball up court. At half-court he passed to FourwardTwo. He threw a bounce pass to Centeria, but Tippi stepped in front and knocked the ball

away. Referina snatched the loose ball and threw it to Dribbler. He caught the pass, dribbled down court and completed another easy lay-up. Two more points for the defenders.

Centeria yelled to her brother. “Hey slim head, no more bounce passes.”

Madisyn cheered.

Go Team Go
Beat the Fangs
They don’t know
How to win this game.

The next possession Centeria caught an up top pass and easily dunked over Tippi. Emmett connected on another three pointer.

“Will somebody guard the three point shooter?” Centeria yelled. Centeria caught another up top pass and dunked over Tippi.

“All day Tippi, all day,” she taunted.

Madisyn yelled, “One minute remaining. The score—Fangs 16, Defenders 10.”

Then she added a cheer.

My team don’t give up
We hang tough
Pass the ball and we
Will catch up.

Dribbler brought the ball up court. He made a no-look pass to Emmett but two Fangs collapsed upon him. Emmett dribbled through the double team and passed the ball to Referina. She shot from the three-point line. Swish, another three points.

“Thirty seconds remaining—Fangs 16, Defenders 13,” Madisyn yelled.

GuardoOne brought the ball up court. He passed a high lob to Centeria. Tippi bent her knees and put all her strength in her feet as she left the floor and ascended into the air high enough to block the pass.

“Wow, how did you do that?” Emmett asked.

“I don’t know. It must be the shoes,” Tippi replied.

They came back down court. Emmett spotted for a three, but he had two defenders on him. Four seconds remaining. Shoot it, Emmett! Shoot it! The Defenders yelled. Emmett released the ball over his defenders. Everyone watched as the ball glided through the air and connected with the basket. Swish, nothing but net.

“What a sweet jump shot,” Tippi, Referina and Dribbler shouted.

Fangs 16. Zearnville Defenders 16.

Overtime.

CHAPTER THIRTY - FOUR

MISS MATCH

Add fifteen minutes to the clock.

Zearnville Defenders controlled the tip. Dribbler threw a no-look pass to Referina. She goes up for a 12 foot jumper, but FourwardOne hacked her wrist and the shot was off balance.

“Foul,” Referina yelled. But no one responded.

GuardoTwo grabbed the rebound and sailed it down court to Centeria who was stationed under the basket. Centeria turned to face the basket. She shot the ball, but Tippi jumped and blocked the shot pinning it to the backboard. Centeria plowed her elbow deep into Tippi’s side.

“That’s a foul,” Tippi shouted.

“Yeah, who says? I don’t see any referees here.”

Back down court Tippi caught the ball and hit a quick turn around jumper. Swish, two points.

Centeria fumed. She got the ball and pushed it back up court. Tippi ran beside her and managed to get her hands underneath Centeria’s dribble. She poked the ball loose. Tippi controlled the ball. She threw it up court just as the Centeria pushed her out of bounds. The ZearnMaster grabbed the ball and scored another two points. By now, Centeria Fang fumed from every pore of her body. It was ten minutes remaining in the game, and the Fangs had not scored. From that moment on, it was all Tippi and Centeria.

Centeria dribbled down court at full speed. Tippi was able to keep up with her effortlessly. When Centeria went in for the shot, Tippi blocked it with ease. Then she grabbed the ball, pushed it up court and scored with a two-handed dunk.

Dribbler's small, muscular body leaped into the air and his blonde dreads followed as he shouted.

"I knew she was the one."

"The one?" Emmett asked.

"Yes, your sister is the one to wear the magic shoes, defeat Centeria and restore order back to Zearnville."

"So, it's the shoes," Emmett stated.

"It's more than the shoes. It's your sister's determination to be the best. She will be a great ballplayer, and so will you. But your sister had to see you as the older Emmett before she could really realize how much she loves you and how much better you two can be as a team. But the game isn't over. Watch."

CHAPTER THIRTY - FIVE

FLAGRANT FOUL

Centeria turned up the dirt. She tripped, pushed and elbowed Tippi every chance she got. With thirty seconds left the score was now 22 to 22. Everyone, the Fangs and the Defenders were watching rumble.

Tippi controlled the ball. She dribbled down court. Centeria was right with her. Tippi dribbled the ball from left to right, behind the back and between her legs to keep Centeria from getting the ball. Centeria moved ahead and waited for Tippi under the basket. "I'll block whatever you put up." She spat the words at Tippi. Tippi took the ball back to half court, and then she started to dribble at full speed toward the basket. She jumped from the free throw line. Her body lifted into the air as smooth and agile as a Hawk. She palmed the ball in her left hand. She stretched her body to full length. She dunked the ball before Centeria could lift her feet off the floor.

"Yeah baby, Fangs 22, Defenders 24," Madisyn yelled.

All the Defenders yelled, "We win. We win."

As Tippi jumped with excitement, Centeria reached for the shoes.

CHAPTER THIRTY - SIX

GAME OVER

GuardoOne grabbed Centeria's arm.

"No sister, you lose, we are going back to Zearnville. We are going home."

Centeria snatched her arm from the claws of her brother. She looked into his eyes, and she knew she had been betrayed.

"You betrayed me."

"No, your greed betrayed you. We only aided the process."

"We?"

"Me and Thea."

"Yes sister," the ZearnMaster added. "We knew you could not resist a chance to try and defeat me. So we lured you into a game of basketball."

"Why you uppity..." Centeria lunged toward the ZearnMaster, but her brothers grabbed her and held her back.

"How dare you lazy-good-for-nothings restrain me?" she shouted.

"We want to go home, sister. We're tired of this musty cave," the brothers said pleadingly.

Centeria continued to resist. She stomped. She lunged. She spat ugly words from her mouth until she was exhausted.

"My sister, you are outnumbered. You must keep your word. You lost the game," the ZearnMaster explained.

“All right, all right, I will go back to Zearnville. I will keep my end of the bargain.
Now, let me go.”

The brothers released their grip and turned their attention to their good sister.

“Thea, can we come home?” FourwardOne asked.

“You can always come home, as long as you come with a pure heart.”

GuardoOne, GuardoTwo, FourwardOne and FourwardTwo all replied, “Our hearts are pure.” Then each of the brothers wrapped their fleshy arms around the ZearnMaster. She did not react with disgust. Her face was full of warmth and compassion. “We have missed you sister.”

“And I have missed you.”

When GuardoOne hugged his sister he whispered, “I do not trust Centeria.”

“Neither do I. We must watch her closely.”

CHAPTER THIRTY - SEVEN

POST GAME SHOW

The return trip to Zearnville was nothing like the exit. When they stepped from the cave the outside world was colored and sunlit with promise of a harmonious future. There were no creatures, sagging branches, or deflated balls. The road on the backside of Zearnville was as clear as the road to the front entrance.

When they arrived, the backdoor to Zearnville opened to a crowd of cheers. Everyone was there to cheer the PeeWees, the HawkEyes, the Groupies. As the Fangs walked through the gates, one by one the brothers turned back into the handsome princes they were before they were cursed. They were tall and lean with skin from dark mocha to creamy caramel. Their pairs of eyes ranged from brown, to black, to green in color. Their hair had changed from the patches of wiry clumps to thick dreads that fell to their massive shoulders. All the single ladies of Zearnville checked their makeup, smoothed their dresses, and brushed their hair.

However, Centeria did not change.

“My sister, I see you are not sincere in your defeat. If you were, your beauty would have returned.”

Centeria reached for Tippi but a HawkEye came down, grabbed her and took her away never to be seen again.

CHAPTER THIRTY - EIGHT

CLEAR THE LOCKER ROOM

“Tippi, you have restored Zearnville back to the beauty and order that ruled for many years. We would love for you to stay with us.”

Tippi looked around at all the friends she had made, but she knew she could not stay.

“No, I love you all, but I must go back home.”

“I will honor your request. However, I would love to keep the shoes as a reminder of you. I will place them in my home along side the portraits of all the great players that came before you.”

Tippi pulled off the shoes and handed them to the ZearnMaster. The ZearnMaster touched the tips of Tippi’s hands as she transferred the shoes, and with that touch, Tippi vanished.

CHAPTER THIRTY – NINE

TIPPI HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

“Tippi, Tippi, we love you so much. Please wake up baby.” Tippi could hear her mother and father calling to her.

“Mama, Daddy, is that you?”

“Yes baby, wake up.”

Tippi didn’t want to open her eyes. She was afraid it was only a dream. Maybe the HawkEye had picked her up also and taken her away with Centeria. But she had to at least take a quick peek. She opened one eye.

“Mama, Daddy?”

“Yes baby, it’s us. We are here.”

“Am I back home?” Both eyes were opened wide.

“You’re in the hospital. You fell at the game, remember?”

“Oh, yes, I do remember. But that was weeks ago.”

“No baby, it was only two days ago,” Tippi looked around the room.

“Oh no! Where is Emmett and Madisyn? Did they make it back?”

“Make it back? Tippi, please calm down.” Her father said. “Everyone is here. We all have been so worried. They’re outside. I will go get them.”

When he left the room, Tippi focused her eyes upon her mother.

“Mama, I promise to be a better sister to Emmett, and I promise to not run off on my own anymore.”

“And I promise,” her mother added, “not to make you wear those Frou-Frou clothes you hate so much.”

Then everyone came into the room, her father, the younger Emmett, Madisyn and the Feenys. When her Grandmother entered, she had a bag in her hands.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“What?”

Tippi’s grandmother pulled out a new pair of black and white, zipper, athletic shoes.