



FREDDIE BRENNER'S
MYSTICAL ADVENTURES

by Kathy J. Forti

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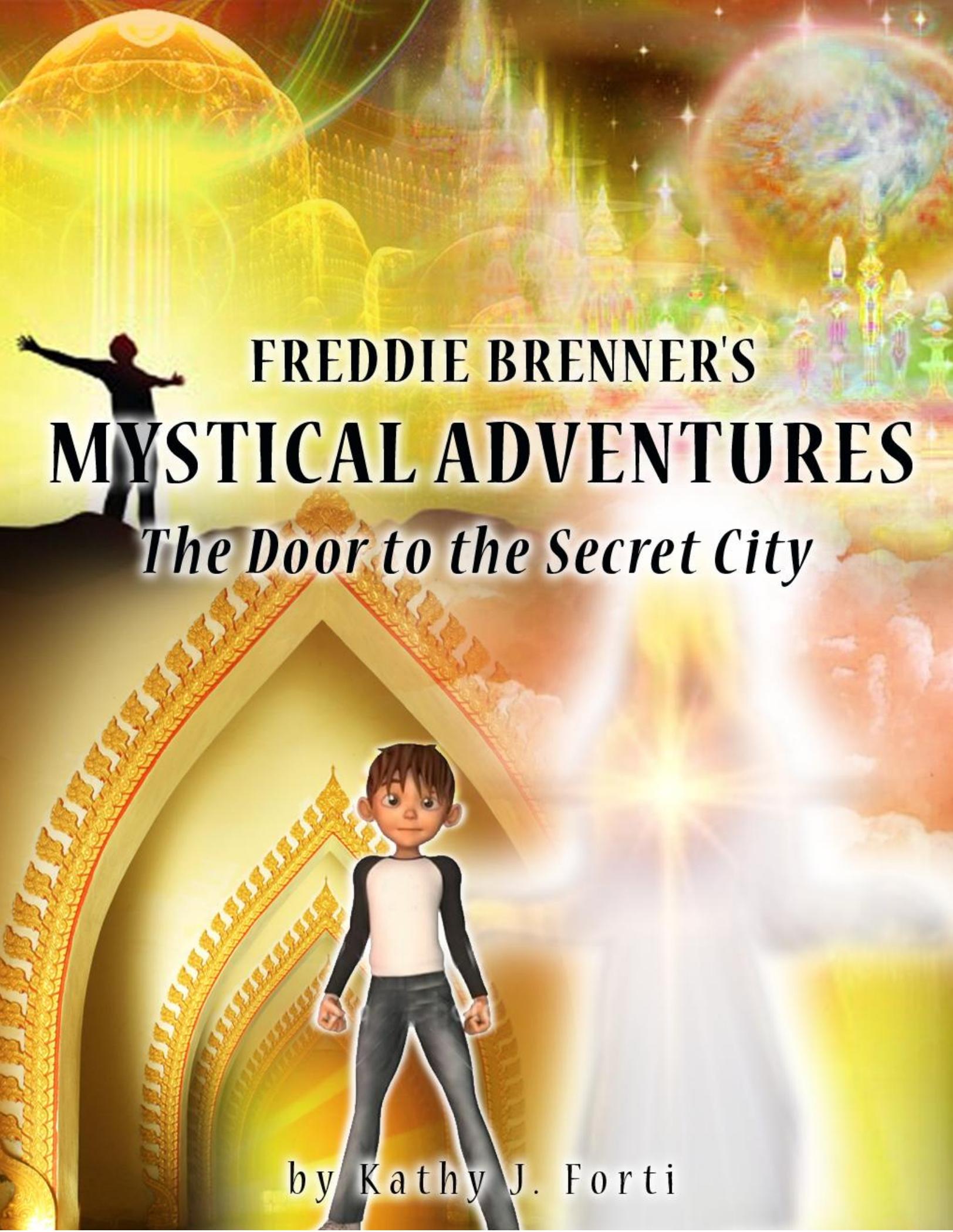
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The Door to the Secret City

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Chapter 1

The Door to the Secret City

Everyone always complained that nothing exciting ever happened on Baxter Street. It was a quiet little street in a quiet little town. Only today things would be much different. There was an awful lot of noise coming from one particular backyard, and all around the neighborhood people were poking their heads out of windows to see what was going on.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that all the sawing and hammering was coming from the Brenner yard. Kids from all over the neighborhood were trying to get a good look. No one had been allowed through the gate. Michael Brenner had been given strict orders by his older brother, Freddie, to keep everyone out and he guarded the entry like a warrior ready to do battle.

School had just let out for the summer and Freddie Brenner, who dreamed of one day becoming the greatest architect in the world, was hard at work building something he hoped the town would never forget---a tree house. Not just any tree house, but a spectacular tree house--a tree house that would be the envy of every kid in the neighborhood.

While Michael was trying hard to keep back the growing crowd of kids, Freddie and his best friend Ernie were up in the branches of a giant oak tree hard at work laying into place the new tree house floor.

Ernie jumped up and down on the floor to test its strength. "It's pretty strong. What's next?"

Freddie unrolled the drawing plans his dad had helped him with and poured over the next step. "The side wall should go in next. I figure we've got to cut the wood just right to make room for the windows and the secret wall panel."

Ernie smiled. "Cool!"

Freddie's mind was filled with big dreams of how his tree house was going to change things on Baxter Street once and for all. In just a few short hours, the word about what he was building had spread like wildfire. Kids were riding their bikes past his yard

to get a better look. Others hung on the fence. Freddie smiled secretly to himself. He didn't have time for any of them now. He knew they were all waiting for the very minute he finished his great masterpiece. Then they'd be swarming from everywhere, like bees, to get in on the action his new tree house would provide. But Freddie had some very different plans in mind. This was *his* tree house and soon he'd make sure everyone knew it.

Freddie was thinking about how he'd even start a special club with special membership. But first they'd have to pass a secret initiation test—and of course, he'd be the president. He'd make all the rules. He'd be the one to decide who could and could not enter. Oh boy! He couldn't wait to get this tree house finished. He was going to be a big man in his neighborhood very soon now—a VERY BIG MAN.

"Hey, Michael. Hand me up some more nails," he shouted down, hammering even faster.

"No, and I don't want to guard this stupid old gate anymore either," Michael complained. "I want to come up there, too? It's not fair. You're having all the fun."

Freddie put down the hammer and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "Aw, c'mon Mike. Hand me the nails! You can come up as soon as I finish the side wall."

"NO!" Michael protested even louder. "I want to come up right now or else!"

Ernie frowned. He knew where this was heading. "He's going to go running to your mom again if he doesn't get his way."

Freddie rolled his eyes. Michael could be such a tattletale and whiner. If he complained to their mother, she'd get annoyed and make him stop work for the day. He didn't want that to happen. Little brothers could be a royal pain.

"All right, Michael. Come on up," he called down, getting to his feet. He took a step towards the ladder. "Just be careful."

But just as Freddie uttered those very words, he forgot to be careful himself. He tripped over the hammer he'd just laid down and lost his balance. He grabbed for a nearby branch to steady himself but wasn't fast enough and it slipped through his hand. It all happened so fast. There was no stopping him as Freddie tumbled backwards, falling

from the safety of his tree-top perch to the ground below. He hit his head with such a “thud” that everything around him became blurry and he slipped into a vast blackness.

Strangely enough, it didn’t last very long. Freddie woke up a few seconds later, a bit stunned, but not feeling any pain. He wasted no time getting to his feet.

“Whew! That was a close one,” he breathed.

Well, now that he was okay, he’d better quiet his brother who was screaming for help at the top of his lungs. Ernie looked pretty worried, too. He was shinnying down the tree house ladder faster than a fireman going to a three-alarm fire.

“All right, you guys,” Freddie called out. “Cut out the silly business. Let’s get back to work.”

No one listened to him. “Look, I’m fine!” he added, watching them run right past him, ignoring him completely.

“What’s the matter with you guys?” he shouted even louder.

Freddie was getting very irritated. Just where did they think they were going, anyway? He turned his head to see for himself, and when he did he witnessed the most incredible sight. He had to look again just to make sure his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. His mouth dropped open in disbelief. No, it couldn’t be!

There he was, Freddie Brenner, still lying on the ground where had had fallen. As clear as the nose on his face—there were now TWO of him! And, the one on the ground wasn’t moving. How in the world had this happened? For the life of him, he didn’t know what to make of it.

Michael’s wild screams had already brought half the neighborhood running. People seemed to be coming from everywhere to find out what was wrong. Freddie saw that Ernie had run to tell Freddie’s mom, and he watched her now as she dashed from the house, her face pale with fright. She’d been baking and Freddie could see the flour still on her hands as she ran to that “other Freddie” lying on the ground and hovered over him.

It seemed that everyone was shouting instructions at once. Freddie was shouting pretty loudly himself, but no one paid any attention to him. A little girl cried out in horror, “Mommy, Mommy is Freddie dead?” He heard the mother quickly “ssshh” the little girl.

“I’m not dead,” Freddie shouted back. “I’m right here in front of you. I’m the real Freddie Brenner, not him,” he said pointing to that “other Freddie” on the ground. He did everything but stand on his head to get someone’s attention, but it was getting him nowhere fast. Everyone just continued to ignore him.

Before long there was the sound of sirens racing up Baxter Street. An ambulance with flashing lights screeched to a stop right in front of Freddie’s house. Two men in white jumped out carrying a long stretcher and quickly fought their way through the crowd to where Freddie had fallen.

As Freddie watched, he got so caught up in the mad confusion of it all that he could only stare in bewilderment as the men whisked away the “other Freddie” into the back of the ambulance. He watched his mother climb in after the “other Freddie,” and an odd feeling came over him. He saw the paramedics slam the doors shut with a finality that seemed to cut Freddie off from everything. He knew he had better do something about it and do it fast.

“Hey, wait a minute! Come back here!” Freddie yelled. “I’m here! Right, here!” But nobody would listen.

Geez! Was everyone going crazy, he wondered? Didn’t they know they’d gotten the wrong Freddie? Somebody was going to have to straighten this whole mess out. It was getting out of hand!

Freddie thought fast. He knew they would take that “other Freddie” to the hospital. He was going to have to get to that hospital too. And just as he thought about how he was going to get to there, he felt himself tingle all over. Then, in a flash he suddenly found himself there.

Wow! Something really weird was happening. Was he dreaming, he wondered? But it didn’t feel like a dream. His body felt kind of funny—not like it normally felt at all. It felt so light, like a feather, and somehow it had taken him to the hospital without having to get a ride there. He didn’t know what to make of it.

Freddie found himself in a busy hospital with nurses and doctors in white starched uniforms hurrying all over the place. He looked in every direction, not knowing where to begin. It was not going to be all that easy finding out what they had done with that “other Freddie” in a place this big.

He went over to the nurse's desk, but they paid him no mind as they discussed some cute new doctor on call. He jumped up on the desk and shouted at the top of his lungs to get someone's attention.

"Now hear this. I'm Freddie Brenner and I'm looking for that kid they brought in here who is pretending to be me. Somebody better answer me or I'm going to tear this hospital apart until I've found him."

He stepped off the desk and as he did another amazing thing happened. He simply hung there, suspended in air for a split second before slowly floating back down to a stop just a few inches off the ground. Freddie looked down once, then twice. His feet weren't even touching the ground.

"Wow! How did I do that?" He tried floating back up again and did it easily. Freddie was amazed. He wondered what else he could do. He spread his arms out and thought about soaring like a bird and he glided right across the reception area.

"Man, oh man, look at me. I can fly! I can actually fly!"

But everyone stared right through him as if he were invisible or something. In fact, Freddie was beginning to believe that maybe he *was* invisible. Boy, wouldn't that be something! He could just see the newspaper headlines now. "Invisible Flying Boy Baffles the World," or "President of the United States Wants Invisible Boy for Top Secret Mission." It might be he really had something going for him here?

Freddie soon learned he could do many more amazing things. He whizzed off down the hospital corridor doing low dives, spins and rolls like a stunt pilot at an air show.

He was having such a great time. Then unexpectedly a door swung open right in his face. It was too late to float out of the way. Freddie braced himself for what was sure to be a good nose clobbering. To his surprise, it never came. He simply passed right through the door as if it weren't even there. Boy, this was getting better and better! Freddie hadn't even felt a twinge. Not only was he invisible and could fly without effort, but now he could also pass through doors. Amazing!

He looked back once again at the door, just to convince himself it really was solid and that he really had passed right through it. The nameplate on the door drew his

attention. He saw to his surprise that it was a name he recognized. “Room 118 – Melissa Flowers,” the sign read.

What luck! If anyone could figure out what was happening to him, Melissa could. She was the smartest girl in his class—maybe even smarter than Freddie, but he wasn’t going to admit it. He’d heard from Ernie just this morning that she was in the hospital having her tonsils taken out. Freddie liked Melissa. She was okay in his book. He had once been assigned to do a project with her for his science class on different sources of energy, and together they’d gotten the only “A” in the class.

He decided to show off just a little. Instead of using the door to her room, which would have been proper, he simply stepped through the wall instead, grinning from ear to ear. But the room was quiet and Freddie could see that Melissa was curled up under the covers sound asleep. On her nightstand sat an unfinished dish of melted chocolate ice cream. In a chair next to the bed sat a big stuffed panda bear.

“Melissa. Wake up,” he whispered. “It’s me—Freddie Brenner. Melissa? Can you hear me?”

Freddie jumped as he heard the door open. Forgetting he was invisible, he dashed back out through the wall just as a nurse entered the room. He’d get back to Melissa later. He still had to find out where that “other Freddie” was. He whizzed around a turn in the corridor, still playing with his speed, until he found himself floating to a stop outside a room where the sound of soft crying could be heard. The door was open and Freddie saw people in hospital uniforms coming and going with machines, monitors and other equipment. He floated into the room to get a better look. Inside he was shocked to see his mother crying. Tears streamed down her soft, smooth cheeks. Freddie’s father was at her side, grave with worry. He must have rushed right over from work. A doctor was speaking to both of them. They just *had* to be talking about him. This was something Freddie wanted to hear. He floated in closer.

He was just in time to catch the doctor’s very next words. “Mr. and Mrs. Brenner, your son is in a coma. He suffered severe shock to the cranial nerves, but we don’t know the full extent of the damage yet. Of course we’re doing all we can for him right now, but his condition is critical.” The doctor paused before delivering the final blow. “We’re not sure if he’s going to make it.”

“Oh my God,” his mother gasped. “Oh, Freddie.”

Freddie hated to see his mom cry. She was so beautiful. “Mom, please don’t cry! Dad, tell her not to cry. I’m okay. Really I am. That doctor doesn’t know what he’s saying. I’m not in a coma. I’m right here and I can do all these really incredible things and I’m having fun---really!”

His mother still cried. “Please Mom. Please don’t cry.”

Freddie decided to see what was happening to that “other Freddie” in the bed everyone was making such a big fuss over. But when he tried to get a better look, a big nurse kept blocking his view. Freddie moved to his right and the nurse moved to her right. Freddie then shifted to his left. So did the nurse. Annoyed, he reached out and pinched her on her rear end to get her out of the way.

The nurse squeaked. “Aahh! Something bit me. There it goes again!”

Freddie could barely control his laughter as he watched the frightened nurse scurry from the room as if a ghost were after her. Boy, would he like to try this out on his math teacher, Mrs. Peabody.

Once again, Freddie floated in closer, trying to size up the situation firsthand. Well, that was him alright lying in that bed. But he couldn’t believe all those tubes and bottles they had hooked up to him. What in the world were they trying to do to him, anyway? Right now he was kind of glad that he wasn’t that “other Freddie.” He looked like he was in pretty bad shape. That poor kid in the bed might look like him, but he was not having as much fun. If only he could tell everyone what had happened. Maybe then they could even tell him what he was supposed to do about it.

Freddie thought about it for a moment. If he was able to pinch that big old nurse, he could probably do a lot of other things as well. He’d just have to do some more experimenting and find out what he could and could not do. One thing Freddie *did* know. If he caused a disturbance, he was bound to make somebody aware of him being there.

Then an idea came to him—a great idea. Maybe he should start pinching all the nurses! Now that would be so cool. He could just imagine it now—a whole hospital full of screaming and jumping nurses. His friend Ernie would split a gut.

He’d start with that pretty nurse over there by the bed--the one who wiggled when she walked. Yes, she’d be perfect! But just as Freddie was about to put his rather

brilliant plan into operation, he was startled to hear someone call his name. He stopped dead in his tracks, hearing it again.

Freddie looked around the hospital room cautiously, wondering where the voice had come from. His eyes darted over to the doorway where a young man dressed in tee shirt and jeans stood watching Freddie's every move. The guy flashed him a warm smile. He was hard to miss because he had on a New York Yankees baseball hat. That was Freddie's favorite team.

"Hi there, Freddie," he said, beckoning him over.

Freddie looked around quickly to see if anyone else had noticed this new guy on the scene. As far as he could tell, nobody paid any attention to him, either.

"You talking to *me*?" Freddie asked suspiciously. Somehow he hoped this had nothing to do with his "Great Pinching Plan." He'd better play dumb until he knew why this guy wanted him.

"Yes, you," nodded the stranger. "Come on. We've got a lot to do. What do you say we get started?"

Freddie wasn't sure what it was they had to do, but here at last was someone who could see him, hear him, and even talk to him. Maybe this guy could fill him in on what was happening to him as well. He figured it might be smart to still play it cautious until he knew the score.

"Get started where?"

"To a very special place," the stranger replied, "and you're halfway there right now." With a little bow, he introduced himself. "My name is Daniel and I'm your Guide."

Yeah, right and I'm Mickey Mouse, he wanted to add. "Hey listen, man. I don't know you and I'm not supposed to talk to strangers!"

Daniel found that amusing. "Oh, we're not strangers at all. We've known each other for many years."

Freddie looked at him like he was crazy. He had never seen the guy before in his life.

"You've never seen me but you know me alright," Daniel said. "I can tell you everything about yourself. Everything you've ever done or even thought about. I was

with you when you took your very first step. You just about banged into everything in sight. You've still got a little scar on your left knee to prove it. Right?"

"Lucky guess," Freddie shot back.

Daniel smiled. "And what about that time four years ago when your dog "Spook" died and you sat in your closet for days refusing to come out."

Freddie frowned. "My Mom told you that!"

"Maybe," Daniel replied. "But then could anyone have told me about that blueberry pie you snatched last week from Mrs. Madigan's Bakery. You know, the one that made you sick."

Freddie gasped. "Nobody knew about that pie. Not even Ernie!"

Daniel shook his head. "I did. You see, Freddie. I've been with you all along. When I could, I helped you. But there were a lot of times when you didn't seem to hear me. You really can be stubborn."

Freddie was stunned. Who was this guy? And how did he know all this stuff about him? Freddie hated to think what else he might know. Maybe if he was so smart he could also tell him what was happening to him. And what was with this "Guide" stuff talk anyway?

Daniel seemed to be able to read his very thoughts. "All your questions will be answered in time, Freddie," he said. "But now we need to be on our way."

"Hey, wait a minute," Freddie blurted out, having a sudden thought. "Are you by any chance supposed to be a guardian angel or something?"

Daniel smiled. "Now you're thinking. That's right. Angel Guide, 1st Class, Kid's Division."

"I thought angels were supposed to have wings and halos."

Daniel only laughed. "You watch too much television. We don't need wings and neither do you. All you have to do is think where you want to be and you're there."

Freddie's mind was racing. "Yeah, that's what happened. I wanted to be at the hospital, and the next thing I know, here I am!"

Freddie wanted answers. "Wait a minute! What's really going on here?"

Daniel looked thoughtful. "Well, Freddie...let me explain it this way. Think of what it must feel like to be a snail dragging around a heavy shell all his life. He can't

move very fast and he certainly can't go many places. And then one day he discovers he can leave that heavy shell behind, crawl out and be free."

"So what do snails and shells have to do with me. Is this some weird science quiz?"

Daniel only smiled. "Well, right now you're sort of like the snail who's left his shell. You see, when you fell out of your tree house you popped right out of your body."

Now, that really got Freddie's attention. "Popped out of my body?"

"That's right. Everyone on earth has a spirit body inside our everyday body, only we can't see it. Our everyday bodies don't live forever. Someday we die. And much like the snail, we too, leave behind our shell. But our spirits never die. So we really live on and on forever."

It was all too weird for Freddie. So this body that could fly and be anywhere it wanted was his spirit body, and everyone had one—only most people didn't know about it.

"That right," Daniel said. "Most people don't find out they have a spirit body until they die and leave their old earthly bodies behind. I can tell you that it's quite a surprise to a lot of people when they find out."

Freddie didn't like where this was going. "Does this mean I...I died?"

"No," Daniel answered. "You're still very much alive. But your spirit body is sort of on a 'special vacation' until your every day body gets stronger. Then you're going to have to go back. But when you do die and leave your body for good, your spirit will once again be free and you'll feel just as you do right now."

This was quite a newsflash to Freddie. He wondered, then, why everyone made such a big deal about dying. All that crying and whispering and saying things like 'we don't talk about the subject.' Daniel was right. People really didn't understand. If they only knew how free and easy it was.

Daniel seemed to be on a time schedule. "We need to be on our way. Are you ready?" he asked.

Freddie gulped, not knowing what to expect. "Yeah, I guess so."

And with those words, Daniel and he stepped through an doorway which appeared out of nowhere. The hospital and nurses vanished in a flash behind them, and

Freddie suddenly found himself being propelled like a jet plane through a long, wide, incredible tunnel filled with the most beautiful and dazzling colors—like a thousand dancing rainbows. Blues, reds, bright yellows, shocking pinks like his mother’s azalea garden, then greens and pulsing purples. They seemed almost alive. It was a sunburst of nature, and Freddie felt like a real space explorer right out of STAR WARS. Spread out in front of him was the entire heavens and a million galaxies of twinkling stars. A bright comet whooshed right past them.

“Wow! Look at that sucker go!” Freddie cried in awe. “I bet I could have touched it if I’d wanted to.”

It was so exciting that Freddie could barely contain himself. He wondered if Daniel had ever visited another planet.

“Yes, I have,” Daniel answered before Freddie could even get the words out of his mouth. “And I’ve been to some you’ve never even heard of.”

All at once they began to slow down. The stars disappeared overhead and the colors around them changed into a brilliant whiteness. Freddie could see that they were nearing what appeared to be the end of this gigantic tunnel.

Freddie felt himself being bathed in a glow of white light that sent a warm, safe and loving feeling all through him. It felt a little like those nights when he used to wake up from a bad dream and his mom or dad would put their arms around him and comfort him until he fell back to sleep. Only this feeling was much better than that. He couldn’t explain it, but Freddie felt as if he was part of the whole world and he would never be alone ever again.

Daniel read his thoughts. “That light you’re feeling now is *love*. So if you’re ever scared again, just remember this light and know you’re never alone.”

The sound of birds singing filled the air. Right before Freddie’s eyes a flock of snow-white doves gently lifted the whiteness surrounding them like a gossamer curtain being drawn back. Beyond was the most breathtaking sight Freddie had ever seen. His heart skipped a beat. Before them lay a shimmering city of crystal that seemed to have no beginning, nor end. It sparkled like a million diamonds.

“Wow!” Freddie exclaimed.

His eager eyes darted everywhere, hoping to see everything at once. Right in the center of this incredible city was a building made entirely of gold that rose high into the sky. Freddie had never seen anything like it, not even in books. It had to have been built for a king.

If only he could build something as great as that, he thought. Who had built it? Better yet, who lived in this great big shining castle? He bet Daniel knew. He was about to ask him, but as usual Daniel had already read his thoughts.

“This is the special place I spoke of, Freddie,” Daniel said. “This is the Golden Temple where all the riches in the universe are kept and that’s where we’re going.”

“No kidding?” Already he could envision chests of gold and jewels the size of rocks all over the place.

Daniel grinned back. “No kidding. But I think you’re going to find it a lot different than you might expect.”

Freddie looked questioningly at Daniel, hoping to read his thoughts.

“What do you mean?” Freddie asked curiously.

“You’ll see,” Daniel replied.

The golden doors to the Temple were so tall, even taller than Daniel. Freddie wondered a little nervously whether giants lived inside. He wondered even more how Daniel planned to get inside. There was no doorbell or doorknob. Maybe he could pass through this door as he had back at the hospital. Freddie glanced back at Daniel to see what his plans were and saw his Guide close his eyes and press his fingertips to the middle of his forehead. The great golden doors slowly opened to them.

Freddie didn’t have time to ask Daniel how he had done that. He was much too eager to find out what was going on inside this Golden Temple. He was soon to find out. As the doors parted, Freddie found himself inside a huge antechamber of glittering gold. Beyond lay a Great Hall from which many people could be seen coming and going.

Freddie could tell right way that something big was happening inside the Golden Temple. He couldn’t quite figure out what it was yet, but he just knew it was something BIG. There seemed to be a great feeling of excitement and though Freddie hadn’t seen any jewel chests yet, he figured that before he left he was going to find them. Maybe

he'd even be able to take a few souvenirs home. His heart beat faster at the thought. No one would ever dispute his being 'a big man' then.

He followed Daniel inside this Great Hall and was amazed at how many people were there—grown-ups as well as kids Freddie's age. Some were younger than he was and some were older. There were people there from all over the world and some who spoke different languages. Freddie saw people of every race, color, and religion. It was like visiting the United Nations Building in New York City. But he wondered what they were all doing here.

As Freddie listened and really looked around him, he noticed something *was* different. Teachers were teaching some of the most amazing things—things he had never seen or even dreamed of before.

The sick and crippled were being healed by stepping into circles of colored light and sound, which spiraled around them. Freddie saw people learning to paint beautiful pictures in the air, without paint or brushes, merely by thinking beautiful thoughts. Farmers were learning to grow large-sized food without water or soil. Engineers were learning to move mountains and tons of rock with the power of their minds and not machinery.

Freddie heard musicians play music that made his body tingle with feelings of happiness and joy. Everyone was learning something. And everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves that Freddie wanted to join in, too. There was so much to see and do in the Golden Temple. The thought of what he could also learn there filled him with great excitement. He could only imagine what wonders the other rooms held. If he could learn all these cool tricks, too, just think of all the fun he could play on the kids back home—especially with his new tree house.

For a second time that day, Freddie was once again surprised to hear someone calling his name. His eyes scanned the Great Hall looking for its source.

"Over here, Freddie," came a familiar voice.

He could see her now, but couldn't believe it. Coming towards him from across the room was none other than Melissa Flowers!

Why, he had just left her back there in the hospital. What was she doing here? Was Melissa also on a special vacation as Daniel had called it?

“Freddie, sometimes it’s easier for peoples’ spirits to reach the Golden Temple when their every day bodies are sick or weak,” Daniel said. “But that’s not always the case. Some very healthy people can find their way here, too, when they’re in a deep, deep, sleep.”

Melissa came rushing up all excited. “Freddie, it IS you! I wasn’t sure at first. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here before. But I’m glad you were able to find this place, too.”

Freddie was startled. “You’ve been here before?”

“Oh, yes,” Melissa breathed. “But sometimes it’s hard finding the way. Angela has to help me.”

“Wait a minute,” Freddie stopped. “Who’s Angela?”

“Angela is my special friend,” Melissa said matter-of-factly. “She’s also *my* angel guide.”

Freddie looked over at Daniel thoughtfully. He didn’t want to tell Melissa he was just finding out about his angel guide. She seemed like she’d known hers for some time now. And the last thing he wanted was for Melissa to think he was dumb or something. He sure hoped Daniel was reading his thoughts right now and wouldn’t blow it for him. Freddie saw Daniel raise an eyebrow in response. He had obviously read Freddie’s thoughts loud and clear. Freddie relaxed a little.

“Um, Melissa--this is Daniel. He’s my angel guide,” Freddie said, making a sweeping gesture of introduction.

“Hello, Melissa,” Daniel smiled warmly. “Angela has spoken quite proudly of you.”

Freddie tried to hide his surprise. So Daniel knew Angela, too! Well, he guessed if you were a guide you probably hung out with other angel guides. He wondered what Melissa was doing there. He wanted to ask her but then she’d know right off he didn’t have a clue about the place he was now in.

“You can go ahead and ask me that, Freddie,” Melissa answered. His mouth dropped open in complete surprise. “The answer is simple. I’m here for my lessons.”

Please, he silently prayed---don’t let Melissa be able to read my thoughts like Daniel can. She would think he was dumb and he’d never live it down.

She laughed, dismissing the idea with a wave of her hand. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone you’re just learning about Daniel for the first time. And I don’t think you’re dumb at all. I think you’re one of the smartest boys I know.”

If Freddie could have looked in a mirror at that very moment, he would have seen his face turn six different shades of red. Now he knew Melissa *did* indeed know what he was thinking. He looked away to hide his embarrassment. It didn’t seem fair. Why couldn’t he read her thoughts as well?

“You *can*, if you concentrate and practice,” she explained. “Ask Daniel.”

Daniel sensed Freddie’s confusion. “Melissa is right. Thoughts can be sent just like radio signals. Some people hear other people’s thoughts and some people feel them. Melissa is learning the power of total concentration, but it’s only a small part of what she’s learning.”

Melissa smiled. “I can help you if you like, Freddie. We can learn together.”

Freddie certainly hoped he could learn to read other’s thought, too. It would be a very handy trick. Then he would know which kids he should let up into his tree house.

Melissa looked at him strangely. “What about me?” she asked. “Will you let me in your tree house?”

“Well being a girl and all---it depends,” Freddie teased. “I might if ...”

Melissa didn’t smile. Instead, she looked disappointed. “You don’t have to explain. I guess I understand.”

Freddie suddenly felt like a first class jerk. He stumbled over his next words, trying to back pedal and undo the damage. “Well, what I meant was...”

Melissa seemed anxious to leave. “I’ve got to go now, Freddie,” she said. “I hope you find what you came here for today. I really do.”

He saw her wave goodbye to Daniel and then hurry off. Freddie could have kicked himself. Now why had he gone and said that to Melissa? Of course he would have let her up into his tree house. He liked Melissa. But the way she had looked at him made him feel like a heel. It bothered him and so did her parting words: ‘*I hope you find what you came here for.*’ What had he come here for anyway, he wondered?

Daniel wasn’t saying much. Maybe he thought Freddie was a jerk, too.

“No, Freddie. I don’t think you’re a jerk at all. And neither does Melissa.”

“So why *am* I here?” Freddie asked.

Daniel had been waiting for that very question. “Like Melissa, you’re here to also learn. When I told you that the Golden Temple held all the riches in world, I wasn’t speaking about gold or jewels. All the secrets of the universe are kept here--the answers to all questions. Freddie, it’s here in the Golden Temple that people learn wisdom. And once a man has gained wisdom—he is the richest of men. But you have a very specific lesson awaiting you today.”

Freddie couldn’t wait to hear it.

“First let me say that each of us is born to accomplish a certain mission, “Daniel explained. “Some of us have very hard missions, some easy, some small and some large--but size or importance doesn’t matter. What really matters is getting our mission done. And like school, we can’t graduate until we’ve finished the work that has been given to us.”

Daniel paused for a moment. “Are you beginning to understand?”

“Yes. I think so,” Freddie answered.

Daniel continued. “When a person completes their special mission it’s a time for celebration. The person can then shed their earthly body and come to live in the Land of the Golden Temple. Here there are no wars, no hate, no poor people, sickness or starvation. And here—you live forever.”

Freddie’s mind was spinning. “Do I have one of these special missions?”

Daniel took him by the hand. “Yes you do. Follow me.”

Side by side Daniel and Freddie ascended a floating staircase that opened onto another huge room. It was filled with thousands upon thousands of miniature-sized buildings for as far as his eyes could see. It was an unbelievable sight. He saw models of the Great Pyramid, beautiful castles, famous towers and cathedrals. He saw majestic bridges and skyscrapers and strange futuristic buildings like nothing he had ever imagined. He looked closer and saw that each building had a name engraved at its base—the name of the architect who designed it.

Freddie raced from model to model trying to take it all in. He knew some of the famous buildings from his dad’s architectural books. That building was in Paris, and that one over there in Chicago, and that one----he stopped. His eyes fell on one model in

particular which looked kind of familiar. He moved closer to it with mounting excitement. It was a model of a large circular house, almost a mansion, and it had a pond and surrounding rock gardens that were beautiful. He'd seen a house just like it in his dreams. He couldn't believe someone else had already built it. This was the kind of house Freddie had envisioned himself designing one day and building---maybe even live in if he was lucky enough. Who had built this wonderful house?

Freddie needed to find out so he peered closer to read the nameplate at its base. He gasped in disbelief. Why, it was his own name! There it was, as plain as day: "Built by Frederick D. Brenner." He looked quickly to Daniel for an explanation.

"It's your name there alright. But building this house is only a part of your mission."

Freddie couldn't believe his ears. He really was going to grow up to be a famous architect after all! And even build this wonderful house. Maybe he'd even be written up in history books. Frederick D. Brenner---Master Builder of the Century. The tree house he was building now would be nothing compared to what he would design someday. He wanted to see all the other buildings he would design as well. Certainly there had to be many more.

"C'mon, Daniel. Show me the other ones I'm also going to build."

"Freddie, try to understand the importance of what I'm showing you right now."

As far as Freddie was concerned, he understood completely. He was going to be famous.

"Freddie, listen. Anyone can build beautiful buildings but you only become great when you build with the love of your fellow man in mind. Everything you build on Earth must be done with this love, and most important, you *must* be willing to share it. That's the mark of a true Master Builder.

"I'm going to be a Master Builder someday. I just know it," Freddie said.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "If you want to achieve greatness in men's eyes, you must first achieve it in God's eyes. Then and only then can you become a true Master Builder."

Daniel paused weighing his words. “Remember, you’ve been given the special talent to build great things. But if you hurt others with this special gift, Freddie, it will be taken away from you.”

Taken away from him? Freddie could hardly think such a terrible thought. What was Daniel saying?

Freddie thought it over. Then with some realization, he looked down guiltily. He thought about how he began his tree house to make all the kids in the neighborhood envious of him—especially since he could decide whom he’d let in and who he’d keep out. Not once had he thought of sharing. Now maybe it was too late. He sure hoped God hadn’t already taken away his gift of building great things. Then he’d never grow up to be a Master Builder. If you’re listening God, he thought, it’s me, Freddie Brenner. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone with my new tree house.

“Freddie, have you noticed anything different about *your* nameplate?”

Freddie looked sadly at his dream house and noticed that the nameplate on it was silver and not gold like most of the others. Freddie was almost afraid to ask what that meant, but he had to know.

“Will I still build this house someday,” he quietly asked.

Daniel folded his arms across his chest and appeared to debate Freddie’s question. “Now, that’s up to you,” he said after awhile. “The silver plate on your building means there is some question whether you will become a true master Builder. It’s not an easy lesson. But once you have learned it, the silver will automatically change to gold.”

Freddie couldn’t bear the thought of never being able to build his special dream house. He felt really awful inside at how selfish he’d been. He’d had that same feeling when Melissa had turned away from him. He was wrong and she had seen it. He guessed he wasn’t perfect and still had a lot to learn. He looked to Daniel for help.

“What can I do to make it right?” he asked.

“I think you already know the answer to that,” Daniel replied.

Yes. Freddie did know the answer. He took one last look at the dream house of his possible future. His dad had once told him that it’s never too late to start over again and do something right. He wanted to believe that was true. He knew there was only one thing to do now. He made up his mind then and there to do it.

“Daniel, I want to go back. I want to go back and try again. It’s still possible, isn’t it?”

Daniel rested his hand on Freddie’s shoulder. “Anything is possible if you truly want it and work for it. Are you willing to do that, Freddie?”

“Yes, I am,” he said without hesitating. More than anything he wanted to complete his special mission. “But can I remember everything I’ve learned here once I get back?”

“I can try and help you, but it’s up to you. Some people recall their experiences here as only a wonderful dream. Don’t be disappointed if you remember but your friend, Melissa, doesn’t.”

Freddie sighed. It was so hard to believe there were so many other worlds out there still to be explored. He knew his father, being an architect, would have loved seeing all the buildings in this room that Freddie had seen here today.

He noticed Daniel had a grin on his face. “Your father also has a secret house of his dreams, Freddie. A house which he’s been afraid to build because he thinks it’s too experimental.”

Freddie was surprised to hear this. His dad had never said anything to him about it.

“Give your dad a message from me. Tell him that his Windmore House can be built if he sees a man named Jeremiah Worthing at Hampton Industries.”

Freddie repeated the information in his head. Yes, he’d try to remember it.

“Are you ready now?” Daniel asked.

It was time to go back—to start again.

“Yes,” Freddie answered. “I’m ready to go back.”

“Remember, when you need me I’ll be there. Now go and learn to be a true Master Builder.” And with those parting words, Freddie felt himself caught in a giant whirlwind that flew him back through the tunnel even faster than before. Back he went through the pulsing colors until at last he found himself in the hospital room where his other body still lay quietly in the bed.

Freddie stood at the foot of the bed and was happy to see that both his parents were still there. They both looked very sad as they kept a constant vigil over his

comatose body. He knew they were both praying really hard for his recovery. And in that moment he knew they loved him very much.

In his head he heard Daniel's last instructions. "When you need me, Freddie, I'll be there for you. You might not see me, but I'll be there."

Freddie's head began to swim with a peculiar dizziness. The room darkened before his eyes and then all at once Freddie fell into a deep, deep sleep.

"He's going to live!" someone was shouting excitedly. "Thank God, he's going to live!"

Those were the very first words Freddie heard as his eyes slowly fluttered open and he found himself lying in a strange hospital bed. Alongside him were his mother and father. Freddie was somewhat puzzled to see that they were smiling and crying at the same time. They were awfully glad to see him.

At first Freddie couldn't quite remember how he had gotten in that hospital bed. Things were still a little fuzzy in his head. What he did remember was having the most incredible dreams. He only wished that he could remember them.

Yet, the faint memory of a face and a special name still lingered in his mind. The name—Daniel.

"Look," his mother said excitedly. "His lips are moving. He's trying to say something."

"Help me, Daniel," he whispered. "Help me remember."

Then all at once he knew it hadn't been a dream. It *had* happened and asking Daniel's help had brought it all back into memory. He was remembering it all just as it had happened.

Freddie's physical body felt somewhat weak, but the excitement of his travels seemed to bring new strength to his tired body.

"Mom and Dad," he smiled up at them. "You'll never guess where I've been."

His mom gave him a big hug and kiss. "Oh, Freddie. We're just glad you came back to us!"

By the next day no one could have made Freddie stop talking. He wanted to tell everyone about all the wonderful things he'd seen and learned. He even admitted to that big old nurse that he'd pinched her to get her to move. She gave him the strangest look. He knew she didn't believe him. It sure sounded crazy. But he knew better. He could hear the hospital staff talking about him and wondering at his miraculous recovery.

Freddie's energy was returning stronger than ever and with it came new excitement. On the day he was to be released from the hospital, he sat on the edge of his hospital bed jabbering away to his parents and his brother as he put on his socks and shoes.

"And then I could see both of you talking to the doctor. I was standing right next to you, Mom, and you were crying when the doctor said I might not make it..."

Freddie immediately saw his mother's startled expression at what he had said. His parents exchanged an odd look.

Michael only wanted to hear the good stuff. "Gosh, Freddie. What did it feel like to be invisible?"

"It was great! I could even..."

His father cleared his throat and cut in. "Maybe we should talk about all this later. We don't want to tire you out."

His mother agreed. "Michael, don't keep asking your brother so many questions."

"Aw gee! Can't I ask him about the secret city again?"

"Michael! Freddie's tired." His mom scolded.

But Freddie wasn't tired at all and just kept on talking. "And you know something else," he said. "Daniel gave me a message for you, too, Dad."

His dad handed him his other shoe. "That's nice. Now put this on."

"Daniel said that your Windmore house can be built if you see a man named Jeremiah Worthing at Hampton Industries." He watched his dad's face turn pale.

"You okay, Dad? You look a little funny."

Just then a nurse came with a wheelchair for Freddie to ride in. Not that he needed it, but those were the hospital rules. Nothing more was said about the secret city, but he could tell that Daniel's message had really gotten his dad thinking.

Freddie was anxious to get back to his tree house. That tree house had been all he could think about while in the hospital. New ideas kept popping into his head—one right after the other. There were some definite changes Freddie wanted to make and he couldn't wait to get started.

At first Michael and Ernie had thought he'd gone crazy or something when he told them all about his new plan. But before long they, too, were excited.

And then late one afternoon, as Freddie sat on the front porch finishing his new drawings, his dad's car pulled in the driveway. It was almost dinnertime and Freddie knew his mother would be calling them into eat any minute. From where he sat, he could see that his dad had a faraway expression on his face. Freddie wondered if he'd had a hard day at work.

His dad glanced down and saw Freddie's detailed drawings. "Pretty impressive," he said. "Looks like a big job."

"We can do it," Freddie said confidently.

His dad stumbled over his next words. "Freddie, do you remember what you told me the day you left the hospital--about Windmore?"

"Sure, Dad. I remember."

His father put down his briefcase and sat down next to him. "I don't know how to say this but, well--you see, Freddie." His dad paused, searching for the right words. "I never told anyone about my Windmore design. Not even your mother. It was sort of my secret dream you might say."

"I know, Dad. Daniel told me that."

"Well, what I want to say is that I guess I didn't really believe what you were saying about this Daniel. But I happened to look up Hampton Industries in the phone book today..."

“You did? And what happened?” Freddie said, all excited.

“I found that a man named Jeremiah Worthing owns the company. In fact, I spoke with him myself. It’s the strangest things but it just so happens he’s planning on building a new house this year and he’s been looking for something really different. I told him about my plans for Windmore and we’re going to meet first thing Monday morning to talk about it.”

“Dad, that’s great!”

His dad shook his head, grinning from ear to ear. “Freddie, just between us—who *is* this Daniel?”

“I told you, Dad. He’s my angel guide.”

“Well, tell him thanks.”

Freddie laughed. “He probably already heard you, Dad. He knows everything.”

Within days Freddie’s dad had gotten him more wood and supplies and the Brenner backyard started to look like lumber yard. Every day Freddie put in long hours working on the tree house, and people from all over the neighborhood, grown-ups and kids alike, came to watch the progress. A lot of them stayed to lend a hand.

“It’s looking great, Freddie. Want some help?” was the usual eager response.

“Sure,” Freddie would say. “C’mon up.”

Freddie Brenner’s tree house had become the neighborhood project. Kids were everywhere in the yard. Some were hard at work sawing and measuring wood while others hoisted cut lumber up on pulleys ropes to Freddie and others fitting them into place. Windows were put in. Wood was sanded down and before long kids with smudged faces were giving the tree house a bright coat of gold paint.

Later that afternoon as Freddie was washing down the new windows, he looked down to see Melissa closely studying the tree house. He hadn’t seen her since that time in the Golden Temple. He wondered if she remembered. Daniel had said she might not. He watched her as she seemed fascinated with his design.

“You like it?” he called down.

“Yes, very much. It reminds me of a place I’ve been to that...” her voice trailed off as she cautiously watched his face for some sign.

Freddie took it a step further. “Yes. It reminds me of a place I’ve been to, too. A place where I *did* find what I was looking for...”

Melissa gasped. “You remembered,” she whispered.

Freddie grinned. “And you did, too. I came over to your room in the hospital when I got better but they told me you’d already gone home. The Golden Temples *was* real, Melissa.”

Melissa seemed relieved to hear that. “I was so afraid you wouldn’t remember, Freddie. It’s hard for some people to believe such a place really exists. They look at you so strangely if you tell them and before long you just don’t tell anyone anymore. Somehow I knew you would be different. *You* would remember.”

Freddie had so many questions to ask her he didn’t know where to begin.

Melissa was thinking the same. “I have a lot of questions to ask you, too. Daniel is a pretty cool guide. I asked Angela all about him.”

“You did?” Now he was really curious. “Hey, can you still read my mind?”

“I’m getting better at it,” she said closing her eyes for just a second to concentrate.

Freddie sent her a clear message. A moment later she opened her eyes smiling. “Why thank you, Freddie. I think you’re okay, too. But you’re also thinking about making a special sign for this tree house.”

She paused, thinking it over. “Sure I’ll help you. I’d love to. In fact, I think I may have just the idea you’re looking for.”

At last the day came when the tree house was finally complete. To mark this great event on Baxter Street, Freddie’s parents gave a big barbecue in their yard for the entire block. Everyone brought loads of food to celebrate the occasion. Even Mrs. Madigan came with her famous blueberry pie. There was music and dancing and nobody

wanted to go home. It was the best party Freddie had ever been to, but the best moment came at the unveiling of his special creation.

A hush fell over the crowd as the curtain dropped—revealing the most incredible tree house anyone had ever seen. Its gold paint glistened. Its spires reached high into the giant branches. The whole neighborhood broke into applause.

“Wow! That’s some tree house someone shouted out.

Michael proudly yelled out over the crowd. “My brother Freddie can build anything! He’s going to be the best builder there is someday.”

Next to Freddie, Melissa smiled brightly. He looked up at the new tree house prouder than ever and knew they were thinking of that beautiful Golden Temple, far, far away they would both visit again someday.

And today they shared another secret. For right in Freddie Brenner’s backyard on Baxter Street, where everyone could see, now stood a tree house that looked exactly like a miniature Golden Temple. This time Freddie had truly shared its construction and had built it as a place where all the kids could come and no one would ever be left out. There would be no secret clubs, memberships or rules. It would be for sharing and learning and having fun together. With all the help he’d gotten, Freddie felt as if it belonged to everyone.

Above the tree house door, Freddie had put up the sign he and Melissa had made for the finishing touch. A sign that read in bold letters “OPEN HOUSE.” He felt Melissa gently nudge his arm.

“Look who’s here,” she whispered.

Freddie’s eyes followed Melissa’s. There, perched on a tree limb looking over the tree house, sat Daniel.

Freddie saw a smile on Daniel’s face. He looked at Freddie, winked, and gave him the thumbs up sign. In Freddie’s mind he heard Daniel whisper for his ears only, “Well done, Freddie. I knew you could do it. You’re on your way to becoming a true Master Builder.”

Freddie winked back. “I sure hope so, Daniel,” he thought to himself. “I sure hope so.”

THE END

FREDDIE BRENNER'S MYSTICAL ADVENTURES



The Team Dream

by Kathy J. Forti

Chapter 2

The Team Dream

Wake up sleepy head. Time to go to school.”
Freddie Brenner pulled the covers over his head and tried blocking out his mother’s voice.

“Freddie—Get moving!”

He groaned. It couldn’t be morning already, could it? He’d been having such a terrific dream about being star player for the New York Yankees, his favorite team. There he’d been—up at bat, bases loaded, hitting a long line drive and running as if a devil were after him past first base, second, then third—his heart pounding like mad as he made that last dash for home plate and victory. And then, just as he was inches away from making his dream come true, his mother had to go and wake him up.

Mothers could have such rotten timing. The roar of the crowd cheering still echoed in his head. Freddie knew it could have been the home run of the century. He’d have made baseball history right up there next to the great Babe Ruth himself.

“I’m warning you, Freddie,” his mother called out. “I’m not going to say it a second time. Get up now or I’ll have your father...”

Freddie threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, not letting his mother finish her warning. He knew only too well that if his dad came upstairs to get him out of bed, he would mean real business and Freddie would be at the end of that business.

Then Freddie suddenly remembered what day it was. He’d been so lost in the glory of his dreams that he’d almost forgotten. Yes, this was going to be a special day for him, all right. Today was the start of spring baseball season at school, and Freddie’s class would vote on whom they wanted for their new Team Captain. Freddie wanted to be chosen really bad, it was just about all he had thought about for the past few days. He knew he’d make a great Team Captain. He also knew a lot of his friends wanted to be chosen for that job as well. It was going to be a close race--a very close race.

Freddie glanced at his younger brother’s empty bed, already made. Michael was probably downstairs finishing his breakfast and getting ready to devour Freddie’s as well.

He was really going to have to hurry if he didn't want to be late on the most important day of the year.

In no time flat he washed, dressed, scooted downstairs and practically gulped down his breakfast.

"Here, Michael. You want my eggs?" he whispered to his brother, looking at the clock.

"Sure," Michael said, wasting no time exchanging his empty plate for Freddie's.

Just then his mother came back into the room and eyed Freddie's clean plate.

"Freddie, it's not healthy to eat that fast," she warned shaking her head. "One minute I can't get you to move fast enough. The next minute you're racing as if you're going to a fire."

She glanced over at Michael who was just starting on Freddie's breakfast. "Now, what's so important that you can't eat nice and slow like your brother?"

"I wanted to catch Melissa on the way to school," he hurriedly explained. He wiped his mouth and pushed his chair away from the table.

"Oh?" his mother said with a knowing little smile.

He heard Michael giggle.

Freddie rolled his eyes. He was sure his mother thought he was madly in love with Melissa or something. Freddie quickly grabbed his books and ducked out the door before his mother could start asking all those stupid questions mothers loved to ask.

He rounded the corner and spotted Melissa half way up the block.

"Melissa, wait up," he called out, racing to catch up.

Since meeting in the Secret City, they had become the best of friends. Melissa was the smartest girl in class, but Freddie knew she was even smarter than anyone even knew. He had promised to keep the knowledge of her telepathic powers secret. But that didn't mean Freddie couldn't ask her to use them for a little help. Right now he was hoping she could give him 'inside information' on today's election for Team Captain.

"Hi Freddie," she smiled, slowing her step.

Freddie was out of breath from running. He wasted no time in getting to the point.

"Melissa, I need to ask a special favor about the class election today."

They were only a block away from school now. Freddie knew there wasn't much time left to ask questions. "I'd like to know—well, am I...?" He felt so foolish blubbing like this.

"You want to know if you're going to win. Don't you?" she finished the question for him.

"Yeah."

He glanced around to make sure none of the kids passing had overheard. He watched Melissa suddenly look off in the distance, a faraway look in her eyes. Freddie knew she was tuning in. She had once told him she saw pictures in her head. He hoped she was seeing them now. He didn't want to rush her, but they were almost on the school grounds. He had to know soon. Hurry, Melissa, he silently thought!

As if hearing his silent plea, Melissa giggled softly to herself. A second later she smiled. "Oh, Freddie. You *are* gong to win!"

He just about jumped out of his sneakers at hearing such news.

"Really?" He couldn't believe his luck.

"What did you see?" he asked hurriedly.

"I see the sun shining down on you and the whole class is congratulating you and..."

Melissa suddenly frowned. "That's odd," she murmured.

"What's odd?" he prompted, sensing trouble.

Melissa still looked off in the distance.

"Freddie, something keeps getting in the way of the sun shining on your victory. Wait---it's a person. A BIG person's shadow. His shadow is blocking the sun."

Freddie held his breath as he watched her face waiting for more details.

"Freddie, it means you're going to win, but someone is going to give you a BIG problem." Melissa sighed. "That's all I see. I can't tell you any more than that."

She saw the disappointment on his face. "Maybe I'm wrong," she added, trying to cheer him up. But she had never been wrong and Freddie knew it.

"Thanks," he said, his mind still off in thoughts of 'The Big Shadow.' Who was it and why would they want to spoil his victory? It just didn't make any sense.

The first bell of the day rang through the halls as Freddie and Melissa made a last minute dash into their homeroom class. Everyone else was scrambling to take their seat.

“Hey, Freddie!” a familiar voice called from across the room.

Freddie looked just in time to see his friend Ernie pitch him an imaginary fast ball from across the room. Freddie caught it on the fly and returned it. Smooth, very smooth.

You could tell spring was in the air—which meant baseball. Baseball mitts were stashed under seats and not a single girl was wearing a skirt that day. Everyone had on jeans and their fastest sneakers. Not a boy or girl would be left unprepared for first day’s practice. A whole assortment of bats had been placed in the umbrella stand by the classroom door. Everyone had brought their favorite. Baseball was a big event in Freddie’s school and a trophy case always displayed the best team’s efforts. Freddie planned on getting one for his team this year, too—just as soon as he was elected Captain.

With the excitement in the air, Freddie pushed the thought of ‘The Big Shadow’ Melissa had seen to the back of his mind. After all, hadn’t Melissa said he would win? Within seconds the class quieted as their teacher, Miss Mark, rapped on her desk for attention.

“Good morning, class,” she said, looking around at all the bright eager faces. “I know team practice begins today, but we still have a lot of work to cover.” There was an immediate chorus of groans heard around the room. Miss Mark rapped on her desk a second time.

“But first..” she said, pausing to wait for everyone to settle down. “We’ll have election for our Team Captain.

There was wild clapping of agreement and Miss Mark rapped on her desk once more. “Alright, class. Let’s get serious now. Remember that the person you choose will need to be a person who shows good leadership abilities. He or she should be fair and just and willing to accept the responsibilities of the team. Most importantly, the person should be someone you can trust. I want you to think carefully before you choose.”

The room got very quiet. Miss Mark went on. “Well then, let’s begin. The floor is open to nominations.”

Freddie straightened up in his seat, waiting for his name to be called.

“I nominate Ernie,” someone opened.

Ernie’s name was written on the blackboard. The class waited, looking around. Freddie knew his name would be next.

Crazy Willy, who was always playing tricks on people, raised his hand and was called on. “I’d like to nominate Gary,” he said, grinning at Gary as if they’d planned it.

“Alright,” Miss Mark said, adding Gary’s name to the list.

Freddie shifted uneasily in his seat. He was starting to get a little nervous. Why were they waiting so long to nominate him? Surely he’d be the next. He had to be.

In the back of the room someone else raised his hand and was called upon. “I think the best person would be...”

Freddie held his breath.

“Kevin!” he suggested.

Freddie looked over at Kevin who was beaming from ear to ear.

Miss Mark also wrote Kevin’s name on the blackboard. There were now three candidates.

Freddie felt a bead of sweat trickle down his forehead. Ernie, Gary and Kevin—all his friends! Why hadn’t anyone nominated him yet? Maybe Melissa was wrong. Maybe he wasn’t going to win after all. How could he win when he wasn’t even nominated? Freddie’s stomach felt like it was tied in knots. He just *had* to be picked! He didn’t want to be left out. Maybe he should have arranged for someone to nominate him since he couldn’t nominate himself. That’s probably how Gary had got Crazy Willy to put up his name. Why hadn’t he told anyone how much he really wanted to be chosen? Maybe they thought he wasn’t interested. He just assumed they’d nominate him anyway. After all, he *was* one of their best players!

“Anyone else?” Miss Mark asked, waiting.

No one said a word and Freddie knew all was lost. Miss Mark was just about to put her chalk down when Freddie heard a voice right behind him.

“Yes, Miss Mark,” Melissa spoke up for all to hear. “I’m nominating Freddie Brenner!”

Freddie breathed a deep sigh of relief and silently thanked Melissa. He vowed to buy her the biggest ice cream sundae she’d ever seen.

Melissa’s nomination of Freddie brought some immediate surprised looks from his friends. It was clear that they were all suddenly weighing their own chance of being elected.

Miss Mark pointed to the four names on the board. “There they are, the four candidates for team captain—Ernie, Gary, Kevin and Freddie. If you’ll write your choice on a piece of paper, fold it and pass it to the front, we’ll count up the votes,” she instructed.

There was a moment of silence throughout the room as everyone wrote down a favorite choice. Freddie wasn’t taking any chances. He liked his friends, but he also wanted to win. He wrote down his own name on the slip of paper.

When everyone’s vote was in, Miss Mark counted them at her desk. Everyone waited expectantly for the results. After what seemed like forever, she put her pen down and stood up.

“It was close,” she said, “but we do have a winner.”

Please, Freddie prayed, let Melissa’s vision be true.

“Our new Team Captain is—Freddie Brenner!”

“Atta boy, Freddie!” someone called out, whistling through their teeth.

All at once he was being congratulated and slapped on the back by his classmates. It was his moment of victory just as Melissa had called it. Melissa passed him a quick note that read—‘I’d like that ice cream sundae to be hot fudge, please.’

Freddie laughed and gave her the thumbs up sign, knowing no one else realized what only he knew. Melissa had once again read his thoughts loud and clear. She had helped him win.

While everyone was still congratulating him and talking about how good the team would be this year, there was a knock on the door. Miss Mark was called out of the room by the principal.

Everyone suddenly turned silent. Something was up. Was the principal mad about all the noise their class had made? Quick glances were exchanged. Everyone could see through the door's glass window that both teacher and principal were wrapped up in a serious discussion about something. But no one could hear what was being said. Freddie bet Melissa knew. He turned his head slightly and saw immediately that she had that look of concentration on her face. He would have given anything to know what she was picking up.

The door finally opened and Miss Mark came back into the room. The door had been left slightly open and Freddie knew someone was still standing out there waiting. He saw the person's shadow.

Miss Mark approached the class to make an announcement. "Class, we have a new student who will be joining us today. He's moved all the way from Kansas and I know we're going to make him feel right at home in his new school." Turning, she motioned to the person standing outside the door to come in.

Everyone's eyes darted to the doorway to see what the new kid looked like. There were a few low snickers heard as the new boy entered the room and approached Miss Mark. It gave everyone a chance to size him up—all of him.

He was the biggest and fattest kid Freddie had ever seen. He must have weighed three or even four times as much as anyone else. He reminded Freddie of a huge rubber ball.

While everyone was still struck speechless with the new kid's size, they all watched as he pulled a large box of candy out of his over-sized book bag and handed it to the teacher quite proudly. The kid smiled such a wide smile it made Freddie wonder if the kid's father owned a chocolate factory.

"What a dweeb!" Kevin muttered under his breath. "Looks like we got ourselves a real winner here."

Miss Mark thanked the new kid and gave him a warm, melting smile. She was probably a pushover for chocolate. Freddie made a mental note of that.

"Why don't you introduce yourself to the class," Miss Mark suggested.

The kid's wide toothy smile faded to one of drop dead anxiety in less than two seconds flat. He faced his new classmates as everyone waited and watched. He opened

his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. The students stared at him even more. He tried again, his face turning redder than a tomato, but he was barely able to stutter out a complete word.

“Mm-mm-mm-my name is J-J-J-Johnny B-Boykin.”

There was scattered laughter throughout the room.

“That will be enough,” Miss Mark broke in. “Johnny, why don’t you take that empty seat over there in the first row, then we can begin class.”

Big mistake, Freddie thought. No one ever took the empty seat in front of Crazy Willy. They knew that Willy was always playing with the screws on it hoping to catch some unsuspecting victim. He was like a spider watching over his web. Freddie could see Willy’s eyes dancing with delight right now.

Everyone figured out what would happen. But no one said a word to stop it. Johnny Boykin plopped himself down on the seat and with one loud groan of wood, the whole desk went crashing in and all the weight of Johnny Boykin with it. The very room seemed to shake with his fall.

Miss Mark looked aghast. There was broken wood all over the floor and the new boy was lying in it all like a smashed pumpkin. Everyone could see that he hadn’t really hurt himself. But he sure did look funny. Freddie had to keep his head down to keep from laughing like all the rest. It was the funniest sight he’d ever seen.

“I’m s-s-s-sorry. I di-didn’t mean to b-break it,” the new boy stuttered out, totally embarrassed.

The janitor had to be called in to cart off the desk for repair, but it looked hopeless. The desk had given up its life. It was clearly ready for a junkyard burial.

After the excitement of the morning, first the Team election and then the appearance of Johnny Boykin, it was hard for anyone to focus on lessons. Miss Mark looked visibly relieved when the day finally ended. Before dismissing the class for the day, she added one final note.

“Freddie, now that you’re Team Captain, I expect you to make sure that Johnny is accepted as a part of the team and given a position like everyone else. As Team Captain I’m counting on you.”

It was like someone had just dropped a bombshell on his perfect day. Was she crazy? She actually wanted him to make sure this new kid was part of the team? Freddie took one look at Johnny Boykin and had some serious doubts. He smelled trouble. But, he figured he'd just have to wait and see what the new kid was able to do at practice.

It seemed everyone else also wanted to see what he could do as well. Every kid in the class came to watch their first practice—even those who weren't on the team. Johnny Boykin was once again surrounded by a sea of eyes watching his every move. It wasn't long before it was evident that Johnny Boykin was no 'All Star'.

"Just look at him!" Ernie complained disgustedly. Johnny waddled slowly to first base. "My grandmother can run faster than that!"

"Well, its no wonder," Susie said coming in off the field and overhearing the comment. "Who could run at all, lugging around all that fat? I saw him eat six hamburgers, five cartons of milk, and a whole bag of chocolate chip cookies for lunch. I thought I was going to puke!"

Freddie tried to keep one eye on the game as he caught bits and snatches of complaints about Johnny Boykin. Melissa was up at bat, now. He watched her wipe sweaty palms on the back of her jeans. She brushed hair out of her way and readied herself for Jennifer's pitch. She hit it hard and fast and it went sailing out into left field. She dashed for first base and was called 'safe'.

"Maybe we should have Melissa give Johnny a few lessons," Ernie suggested snidely.

Everyone kept after Freddie to do something about it. "You're the Team Captain," he heard over and over again from just about every kid on the team. "If you don't get rid of him he'll lose every single game for us." The situation was quickly giving Freddie a very big headache.

He didn't know what to do. He certainly had to agree with his fellow teammates. The 'Mighty Lions,' as they called themselves, would have a tough time beating any of the other teams if Johnny continued to play. He was just too slow, too big, and half the time Freddie couldn't even understand what he was saying with all that stuttering. If only he could think of some way of getting Johnny off the Team without Miss Mark getting mad at him.

Freddie thought about what Melissa had told him that morning about her vision. He understood now whom ‘The Big Shadow’ was that was going to cause problems for him. That ‘Big Shadow’ was none other than Johnny Boykin himself!

Freddie was almost glad when practice ended for the day. His temper was burning and he felt like a lion ready to attack the next person who even mentioned the name ‘Johnny Boykin’ to him again.

He waited for Melissa so that he could make good his word on that hot fudge sundae he’d promised her. Maybe the ice cream would make him feel better. With baseball gear in tow, the two of them walked to the neighborhood ice cream shop.

“I wish he’d never moved here!” Freddie told Melissa, counting out his allowance money to pay for their sundaes. “Can’t Miss Mark see he’s too slow and too fat to play baseball? I’m going to tell him first thing in the morning that there’s no place for him on my team.”

Melissa dug into the gooey fudge and listened to Freddie go on and on about Johnny Boykin.

“He’s not really that bad,” she said at last. “He may not be very good at baseball and I’d hate to see him make our team lose points, but I feel sorry for him.”

Freddie looked up in surprise. “Sorry for him! What for? He’s worthless.”

Melissa popped another spoonful in her mouth. “Well, I talked to him this afternoon and he’s really quite nice. I was surprised that he didn’t stutter at all when we spoke. I couldn’t figure it out, so I peeked inside his head to find out why and...”

“You what?” Freddie blurted out.

“You know,” Melissa said. “I read his thoughts a little. I found out that he only stutters when he’s nervous and scared and when people expect a lot from him. Boy, was he ever scared meeting our class today.”

“Did you find out anything else?” Freddie asked, trying not to appear too interested.

“Yeah. He really loves baseball,” she went on. “I kept hearing baseball stats going on in his head during practice. It was the oddest thing. He was mentally recording everyone’s plays like a computer bank.”

She suddenly had a thought. “I bet he’s a real whiz at math.”

Freddie was only half listening to Melissa's last remark. Johnny Boykin was odd all right. But Freddie still didn't want him on the team. Right now he didn't care who knew it—even Melissa.

Freddie was still thinking about what to do all the way through homework and dinner, and even as he finally crawled into bed for the night. He still hadn't come up with a good plan of action. It made him even madder at Johnny Boykin for coming into his life and messing it up just when all the kids were counting on him to lead the 'Mighty Lions' to victory.

"What a jerk!" he mumbled to himself as his head hit the pillow. Within seconds he was sound asleep.

Freddie opened his eyes and awakened in his dream. It was a little startling to find himself in his warm bed one minute and the next minute walking down an unfamiliar dirt road with several of his classmates. There were seven of them and they were all team members of the 'Mighty Lions'. Everyone was talking excitedly about where they were going.

"Hey, where *are* we going?" Freddie finally asked.

Ernie pointed down the long road. "There's some kind of sporting event at the stadium. We're taking a class trip to see it."

"Great!" Freddie said, glad he'd decided to come along.

Just then the group came to a fork in the road, which led off in two separate directions.

"Which way should we go?" Freddie asked.

"Oh look," someone said, "there's Melissa sitting over by the tree."

"Want to join us?" Freddie called to her. "We're going on a class trip."

Melissa smiled and waved them on. "No, I'm waiting for my guide, Angela, to meet me here. She's already made plans for me to join her somewhere else."

Freddie felt somewhat disappointed that Melissa wouldn't be joining them. He had never met Melissa's angel guide Angela, but Melissa had met Freddie's guide

Daniel. Even though he knew that everyone was supposed to have a guide, he thought that Daniel was probably the best guide anyone could have gotten. He wondered where Daniel was right now. Maybe he didn't have anything important to learn today and Daniel had taken the day off. Hadn't Ernie said that they were only going to see some games at the stadium?

"We'd better get going," Jennifer suggested.

The group waved goodbye to Melissa and continued down the road to the left. It was a very hot day and the road was dry and dusty. Freddie and his teammates decided to stop alongside a nearby river bank and refresh themselves with some cool water before proceeding on. As each of them leaned over the river bank to scoop up water, seven little snakes popped their heads out of the water and bit each person's hand.

It was just a little bite, but Freddie uttered a loud surprised "Ouch!" just like his friends. And with that, just as mysteriously as they came, the seven snakes disappeared back into the water without a trace.

Freddie stared at the water, not believing what had just happened. Within a few seconds his hand started tingling oddly and Freddie wondered if there was any danger that the snakes were poisonous. He didn't have long to dwell on it. His eyes grew wide as he watched his right hand swell up, getting bigger by the second. But it didn't stop there. Other things were also beginning to feel odd about his body.

Freddie watched with growing alarm as his other arm also swelled up. Pretty soon he felt that odd tingling sensation begin to spread up his toes and he called out for one of his friends to come help him. But Freddie soon saw that his friends were swelling up like huge balloons, each getting more and more bloated with every passing second. Nothing could stop it.

Freddie couldn't even see his toes anymore. His body had become huge, round and puffy. He tried taking a few steps but he felt as heavy as an elephant. What type of snakes had done this to him and his friends?

Freddie's teammates were all as bewildered as him. The only thing they could do was call for help and hope some passing car stopped. Maybe someone could get them a doctor. So one by one, they each took up the call for help.

They'd all been shouting for help for about an hour, their voices becoming quite hoarse, when at last they heard the sound of sirens off in the distance. Whoever it was, was coming their way. The sirens became louder and louder.

Freddie felt a sense of relief as a big gray paddy wagon pulled to a stop in front of them and a group of uniformed men jumped out.

"You're under arrest!" one of the officers charged, slapping handcuffs on Freddie's wrists. The other officers did the same to Freddie's team members.

"What are you talking about?" Freddie demanded. "I haven't done a thing!"

The officer just laughed at him. "You're guilty of breaking Law 11-8, Section 52 of THE BODY CODE. You're FAT buddy, and in this state that's a crime punishable by death!"

Freddie couldn't believe his ears. Freddie Brenner being called *fat*! Why that guy had some nerve. He was not fat. It was just that darn snake's bite. He'd straighten this mess out before it went any further.

"You've made a big mistake, officer," Freddie said, trying to explain. "You see, I got bit by this snake and..."

But the officer wasn't listening. "No, you've made the mistake FATSO," the arresting officer charged. "You got any excuses—you tell it to the Judge, not me. Now get rolling!"

With a good hard kick of his booted foot, he sent Freddie rolling headlong into the van like a large rubber ball. His friends were given the same treatment as they were all rolled into the FAT VAN. The door bolted shut after them. They were suddenly plunged into total darkness.

"Now what do we do?" Kevin whispered nervously next to him. "Those guys aren't joking. They told me that they make ham sandwiches out of fat people like us."

Freddie was irritated. "Shut up Kevin. No one's going to make a ham sandwich out of you.

"That's because we all know you're nothing but baloney!" Ernie added.

Freddie didn't laugh. "Listen. Once we talk to this Judge everything will be straightened out. You'll see."

Everyone was feeling scared. Freddie didn't feel all that confident himself. He thought he heard Jennifer crying softly in the corner somewhere. Or was that really Gary? It was too dark to tell.

"I wish we hadn't come," one of the girls said. "I wish we'd gone with Melissa and her friend Angela instead."

It was hot inside the van and Freddie felt sweat running down his face and pudgy body. They were constantly thrown against each other as the paddy wagon bounced down the road at a fast pace. He couldn't understand what was happening. Where in the world were they where they treated fat people so badly?

The police van soon shuddered to a complete stop. The doors were thrown open, revealing that they were now in some sort of big public arena. Freddie could feel Ernie shaking in his shoes next to him. Freddie felt nervous, too. He didn't like the sound he heard coming from the crowd. They were hissing and booing as the officers rolled him and his team mates into the open stadium.

"There will be silence!" a great, booming voice came over the loudspeaker. A hush fell over the crowd.

Freddie furtively looked around. Thousands of boys and girls his age filled the stadium seats—not an overweight one among them. They looked like an unfriendly lot. Freddie was beginning to wish this were one class trip he hadn't come along on either. Lucky Melissa!

"The offenders will step forward and approach the bench," the booming voice commanded once again.

Freddie and his friends were given a booted kick by several of the officers. Together they bounced like rubber balls across the packed arena. When they finally rolled to a stop, they were in front of the biggest desk Freddie had ever laid eyes on. Sitting behind the desk was—THE JUDGE. It said so in big bold letters on his nameplate. The Judge was dressed in flowing black robes and glared down at all of them from under bushy black eyebrows. He looked like the devil himself.

"So you've broken the law!" he thundered, pointing his finger at each of them. "There is no room for fat people here. You eat too much, you're too slow and worst of all, you'd be worthless at running bases. This here is a BASEBALL STATE and the

likes of your kind give us a bad name. Take them away!” he growled to the officers amidst a loud cheer of approval from the stands.

“Wait!” Freddie blurted out.

“Who said that?” the Judge snapped, scowling from ear to ear.

“I did,” Freddie confessed, watching the Judge turn his beady eyes on him.

Freddie gulped nervously. This whole thing was a silly mistake. Surely the Judge would see that once he explained about the snakes. He just had to.

“And who are you?” the Judge demanded

Freddie swallowed loudly. “I’m Freddie Brenner and I’ve got something to say about this.” After all, he was the Team Captain. It seemed like his duty to get his teammates out of this mess.

The Judge’s eyes narrowed. “Oh you do, do you? You’ve got exactly one minute to say it—so get on with it!” he boomed back.

Freddie opened his mouth to talk but suddenly nothing would come out. He stuttered out a weak, “b-b-b-but” and heard the crowd roar with laughter. The judge turned his attention to his teammates.

“Looks like your friend’s lost his tongue,” he bellowed. “Now, any of you also got something to say?”

Suddenly all his friends were stuttering and babbling at once. No one could get an understandable word out of them. It was turning into a real nightmare. No one would give them a chance. No one would listen to them. What kind of people treated fat people so unfairly?

Freddie felt sick inside as the Judge declared the sentence. “Feed them all to the mighty lions!” he declared.

With that, Freddie heard his friends begin wailing and moaning inside their pudgy little bodies. They rolled and rocked from side to side in terror. He and his teammates had set out to see a sporting event at the stadium. Now they were finding out that *they* were the main show.

The crowd went wild with frenzy as the animal gates were thrown open. Seven snarling lions stared hungrily at Freddie and his friends.

“No. Not the lions!” Freddie began screaming, as one of the lions headed right for him. “Help me! Please someone help me!” Freddie screamed louder as a feeling of helplessness took over. He knew he was surely doomed and would be cat food any second now.

But then the strangest thing happened. In a twinkling of an eye, it was as if time suddenly stood still. The crowd froze in their seats. The lion heading straight for Freddie froze in his tracks, and all around not a sound could be heard. Time had stopped.

Freddie blinked in surprise, not believing his eyes. What had caused this unbelievable stroke of luck?

In answer to his question, he saw a man walking across the stadium field headed in Freddie’s direction. He wore that old familiar New York Yankees baseball hat. He breathed a sigh of relief, knowing instantly it was his angel guide, Daniel, who had come to his rescue. Freddie had never been so glad to see anyone in his life. Daniel had helped him out so many times in the past he’d lost count. Lucky for him, that’s what angels were supposed to do.

“I see you’ve gotten yourself into one fine mess here,” Daniel said sizing up the situation and the lion ready to pounce.

“You’ve got to get me out of this terrible dream,” Freddie pleaded, still nervously watching the frozen lion. He knew it could come back to life at any moment.

Daniel took in Freddie’s huge pudgy shape. “This is your dream, Freddie. You’re the one making it all happen. So, I guess that makes you the director. Didn’t know that, huh?”

Freddie looked at Daniel as if he’d lost his mind.

“It seems to me that you’re just going to have to change the ending if you want to get out of this mess. You’ve got the power to do it. Of course, you can always wake yourself up and not have to face what happens. But you’ll just keep having the same dream until you figure out what you have to do to stop it.”

Freddie didn’t like the sound of that. “What are you talking about?” he shot back. “You think I wanted to be in this nightmare in the first place? You think I enjoy looking like this? That I can’t wait to have that lion over there make hamburger meat out of me?”

“It doesn’t feel so good, does it, Freddie?” Daniel pointed out. “And it didn’t feel so good to have everyone making fun of your size either, I bet.”

Well, at last Daniel was beginning to get the picture.

“You’re darn right!” Freddie shot back. “They didn’t care who I was—me, Freddie Brenner. All they could see was that I was too fat for their crummy old baseball state!”

“Hmm,” Daniel said thinking it over. “Must be an epidemic going around. Why just today I ran into Johnny Boykin’s guide, Victor, and he told me that some classmates were treating Johnny just like this nightmare here is treating *you*. Amazing coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

Daniel nonchalantly glanced over at Freddie. “You wouldn’t happen to know this Johnny Boykin kid by any chance, would you?”

Freddie wanted to crawl into his balloon-like body and hide. He knew darn well he couldn’t put anything over on Daniel. Daniel had a way of knowing everything, and as sure as Freddie was quivering there, Daniel knew what had happened to that new kid Johnny at school today. And, most likely, Freddie’s part in it. Wouldn’t you know it—thoughts of the Boykin kid were bugging him even in his dream life, too.

“Daniel—nobody—I mean nobody really wants him on the team,” Freddie complained. “He’s just not as good at ball as the rest of us.”

He saw Daniel frown.

“Freddie, do you remember how you felt inside when you thought no one would nominate you for Team Captain?”

Freddie remembered all too well how it felt. He’d wondered if anyone really liked him.

“Well it could be that Johnny feels the very same way. Melissa saved you from feeling left out. Are you going to save Johnny?”

Freddie felt confused. It hadn’t occurred to him that Johnny might have similar feelings. But he still didn’t know what to do about it. His teammates were looking to him to lead them to victory. Why didn’t Daniel see that?

“But I’m Team Captain,” he tried to explain. “I have to do what’s best for the team. If you knew anything about baseball you’d know that...”

Freddie stopped, his words trailing off. He eyed Daniel's New York Yankees hat suspiciously.

"Just what do you know about baseball, anyway?"

Daniel had a secret little smile on his face as he took his hat off and re-adjusted the fit. "I'm going to tell you a story not many people know about. It was a long time ago, Freddie. Back when Babe Ruth was a boy just about your age."

Freddie's mouth dropped open. "You mean *"the"* Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees?!"

"The very one," Daniel confirmed.

Freddie's eyes widened in surprise. "You knew him?"

"Yes, I did," Daniel said. "The Babe was a real ballplayer even then. He was also a leader, Freddie. The type that's not afraid to be different, to stand up for what he believed in. His young teammates looked up to him for it, and there wasn't a boy who didn't want him for their Team Captain.

"One day while the team was getting ready for practice, Babe felt someone tugging at his elbow and looked down to see this tiny little boy staring up at him through big round eyeglasses.

"What do you want, kid?" the Babe said. And the little boy, who barely came up to the Babe's waist, told him he wanted to play baseball.

"At first the Babe just laughed because he thought the little boy was joking, but when he saw the boy was serious he said 'Well I'll be darned! Kid, I bet you can't even hold up a bat!'

"It was then that some of the other teammates overheard the Babe's conversation with the boy and they came over to have a little fun with him. They told the boy to be sure to come back that next day when try-outs started for the new league midget team. Oh, they really gave that boy the business but he wouldn't leave. One team member even grabbed the boy's glasses and threw them from one player to the next just over the little boy's reach. They all laughed as the boy stumbled trying to get them back. Someone finally threw them at the little boy's feet and not being able to see very well without them, the boy accidentally stepped on them and the glasses broke. The little boy felt like crying, but he wanted to play ball more than anything. He wasn't going to give up.

“Then right in the middle of all that teasing he heard the Babe say, ‘If the kid wants to play ball—I say, let him play ball!’

“Well everyone stopped and stared at the Babe as if he’d gone crazy or something.

“ ‘But Babe,’ they argued. ‘This kid’s no good to us. Why he couldn’t even run bases fast enough! We don’t want him on the team.’

“ ‘Here, kid,’ the Babe said, grabbing a bat and tossing it to the little boy who barely caught it. ‘Now show these guys they’re wrong.’

“Well, the little boy was nervous with everyone watching him and he didn’t do so good—in fact, he did pretty miserably and of course the other team members continued to laugh.

“The Babe took the little boy aside. ‘You sure you really want to play ball, kid?’ he asked doubtfully.

“The little boy nodded. More than anything he wanted to play ball.

“The Babe scratched his head, thinking. ‘Well, kid, maybe you just need a little extra help—that’s all.’

“And so the Babe helped him. Taught him everything he knew and in no time that little boy turned out to be a pretty good player after all. No one laughed at him again.”

Daniel stopped, appearing to come to the end of his story, but Freddie was bursting with curiosity.

“And I bet the little boy grew up to be a famous ball player, too, didn’t he?” Freddie exclaimed. “And all because the Babe gave him a second chance. Who was he, Daniel? C’mon, you can tell me!”

Daniel shook his head. “No, he didn’t become a famous ball player like the Babe, but he did pass on what the Babe taught him. He became a coach and continued to help other boys become the best they could, despite all odds.”

Freddie sure liked hearing the story about the Babe and the little boy, but his curiosity was growing.

“How is it you know so much about the Babe?” he asked.

Daniel seemed to be remembering another time as he answered. “Because I was the Babe’s Guide back then.”

Freddie’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “You??” he gasped. “You were the Babe’s guide, too?”

Daniel grinned. “Don’t look so shocked, Freddie. There have been many I’ve given guidance to over the years. Some of them I’m sure you’ve read about in your history books. When they needed help I was there—just as I was there for the Babe when he was in a jam and needed a ‘second chance,’ just like that little boy he helped.”

Freddie’s ears picked up. “What kind of jam do you mean?” he asked, seeing Daniel’s eyes twinkle with delight.

It was obvious Daniel was enjoying his story. “Well, it was the year 1928—the year of the World Series. The Babe was with the Yankees then and it wasn’t such a good time for him. He had a real sore knee, which he’d twisted some time before the game. They thought the Babe was finished, that he might not be able to play, but he was determined. That very day he’d visited a sick little boy in the hospital—a fan of his, and he’d promised him he’d hit three home runs if the little boy would get better. Nobody believed the Babe could do it. Three home runs are pretty hard to pull off. The Babe knew it, too. But he sure didn’t want to disappoint that little boy. Well, before the game I heard the Babe silently pray—‘If anybody up there is listening, I sure could use some extra help right now’...and so help was exactly what the Babe was given. I made sure he was sent a little extra energy so his sore knee would be real strong for the game and he wouldn’t feel any pain. The rest is history. The Yankees won the World Series that year and the Babe made those three home runs for that little boy in the hospital just as he promised. He broke his own record that day.”

“Wow!” Freddie breathed, thinking about all Daniel had told him. He guessed that’s why Daniel liked wearing the Yankee emblem so much. In a small way, he had helped make history for the Team. He was part of that Team. He guessed everyone was a part of some kind of team.

Freddie thought of his own Team the Mighty Lions. Maybe Johnny Boykin also deserved a second chance like the Babe had done for that little boy. All at once Freddie’s

thoughts returned to the present and the tough spot he was still in with that lion who looked like he was out for blood. Time couldn't stand still forever.

"You know, Freddie. You ought to take a closer look at this lion," Daniel remarked. He walked over to the beast and ran his hand through the animal's silky mane. "Funny, but he looks a lot like you—a spitting image."

Freddie was not about to get any closer to that lion than he dared. He stood his ground and peered closer at the creature for the first time. Oh, my God! Daniel was right. The lion's face *was* the spitting image of Freddie's very own. He'd been too much in fear to even notice it.

He wondered why he was being attacked by a lion that looked just like him? And atop his head, Freddie could see that the Lion was wearing a baseball hat that had their team emblem on it—the 'Mighty Lions.' What did it all mean?

"You're a pretty smart kid, Freddie. Can't you figure it out?" Daniel answered reading Freddie's thoughts.

Indeed, Freddie's thoughts were spinning faster and faster. And as they did, he began to realize a very important lesson. The lesson that maybe he should treat others the way he would want to be treated himself. It was as simple as that. He himself had been acting like a mighty lion—the 'King of the Jungle'—just because he was Team Captain. That's what this dream was trying to show him. In his fat, little pudgy body, he was seeing how it felt to be in Johnny Boykin's shoes. It was pretty frightening when you thought about it. Sometimes you really had to see things from the other person's eyes before you could understand how it was.

"I guess my friends and I didn't treat Johnny very nicely today, did we?" Freddie admitted. "We made fun of his size and how he talked. I think that's what this nightmare is trying to show me. That it doesn't feel very good to have someone do that to you, so you shouldn't act that way in the first place."

Daniel applauded him. "I knew you were a smart kid. I'd say you've done your homework well."

Freddie was puzzled. "Homework?"

"Yes, homework," Daniel repeated. "That's what nightmares are for. They try to show you when you're doing something wrong. Sometimes they have to scare you into

seeing it. You see, dreams are like school lessons. But nightmares—well, nightmares are like extra homework assignments when you're not quite getting the message. They can be very helpful, just like yours turned out to be tonight."

"It looks like you've got everything under control here," Daniel added, giving the frozen lion an affectionate pat on the back. "I've got to run along now. Just remember, when you need me—I'll be there."

"Where are you going?!" Freddie screamed, still wide-eyed. "I need you right now! You're not going to leave me here like this with that lion, are you?"

Daniel sported a wide grin. "Why he's just an old pussy cat. You can handle him."

Freddie had to think fast. He'd try anything to stall Daniel from leaving him here alone with that lion. "But, Daniel," he began desperately.

Daniel paused only a moment longer. "Look, Freddie. That lion over there is really YOU. The meaner you get toward people, the meaner he gets. Only you have the power to change his behavior. Only you can change the outcome of this dream. Remember that. Be seeing you, Freddie."

And without giving Freddie a chance to say another word, Daniel was gone—disappearing without a trace.

All at once, time became unfrozen. Freddie could hear the crowd still screaming and yelling for blood all around the stadium. And the lion—good lord, the lion was running straight for him.

Freddie quickly closed his eyes and silently prayed. "I don't want to hurt anyone any more. I don't want to hurt anyone any more. I don't want to hurt..." Freddie stopped. Something big, wet and sloppy was running up and down his cheek.

He opened one trembling eye and found himself staring eye to eye with the very same lion who only seconds before had appeared ready to devour him. Freddie couldn't believe his eyes. Something had caused a great change to take place. This lion was now licking Freddie's cheek like a playful kitten and purring lovingly towards him as well.

Like a thunderbolt, the answer hit him. Daniel *was* right! Freddie Brenner *did* have the power to change any nightmare. He had merely to change his own thoughts first. When he made up his mind not to hurt anyone anymore, the angry lion inside

Freddie had changed into a loving lion that was as harmless as a kitten. As if to agree with Freddie's insight, the lion began jumping around playfully. But at the same time, Freddie's dream was beginning to fade faster and faster. Somebody was calling his name.

In a flash, Freddie woke up in his own bed only to find his brother Michael jumping up and down on his mattress.

"Better get up, Freddie," Michael taunted, giving one last bounce before making a quick dash off the bed and out the bedroom door.

Freddie couldn't even be annoyed with Michael's pestering this morning. He was just glad to wake up safe and sound in his own bed again. Freddie edged his hand down under the covers and breathed a sigh of relief. He was back in his own body again, too.

On the way to school that morning, Freddie's thoughts were still on that night's dream. He hardly noticed anything else.

"Hi," Ernie mumbled, meeting Freddie at the corner.

"Hi," Freddie mumbled back.

They both walked along in silence, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. At the next corner, they met Gary and Kevin, looking very tired.

"What a night I had," Kevin said with a noisy yawn.

"You think you had a bad night," Gary threw in, "mine was the pits---and I mean the pits! All these lions were after me!"

Freddie, Ernie and Kevin stopped dead in their tracks and stared incredulously at Gary.

"I had a dream about lions, too!" Freddie blurted out.

"So did I!" chimed in Ernie and Kevin.

Suddenly everyone was talking at once. Ernie was screaming things about huge water snakes munching on his hand. Gary complained of lions with fangs the size of carrots and Kevin talked of nothing but how he had grown as big as the Goodyear blimp. In the end, their stories all fit. Somehow, unexplained to them, each of them had had the

very same dream as Freddie. How many of the others had also experienced it, Freddie wondered? Jennifer, Crazy Willy, Susie—they'd all been in the dream. And, what about Melissa? Maybe she hadn't meant to join them. That's why Angela had taken her somewhere else. Freddie was sure of it.

"What did you make of your dream?" Freddie asked, wondering if his friends had learned some of the same things Freddie had.

Gary was the first to give his opinion. "Ahh, dreams don't mean a thing. I don't pay any attention to them. I have lots of nightmares and they don't bother me a bit," he boasted.

The others said nothing. Freddie wondered if that's why people did have lots of nightmares—because they didn't pay attention to what the nightmares were trying to tell them in the first place. Somehow, he had a feeling Daniel would have answered 'Yes' to that one. His friend Gary would probably find that out some day just as Freddie had last night. Maybe his angel guide would help him if he listened.

Freddie glanced across the street and saw Johnny Boykin walking to school alone. He remembered Babe Ruth and the little boy.

"I'll meet you guys at school," Freddie said, having an idea. "I've got to talk to that new kid, Johnny, about something important."

Before his friends could say another word, Freddie darted across the street and fell into step alongside Johnny. Johnny looked up, somewhat surprised.

"You know Johnny," Freddie began, thinking fast. "I hear you've got quite a head for numbers."

Johnny looked at him suspiciously. "Who t-t-told you t-that?" he stuttered out.

Freddie cringed at his slip. Melissa had told him that, that's who. She'd been reading Johnny's thoughts. He couldn't very well go and tell Johnny that. He remembered Melissa saying something that had given Freddie an idea. If she was right, which she usually was, Johnny could turn out to be really valuable for the Team after all.

"It's not important how I know," Freddie said, brushing it aside. "What *is* important is that our Team could really use an official record keeper. You know—someone to keep score and record plays, figure out batting averages, strengths, weaknesses—that kind of stuff. Not only for our Team, but our opponents so we'd know

what to expect. We need someone who's a whiz with statistics. We'd really be able to whip those other teams good then. Johnny, I need your help. What do you say?"

Johnny looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. I thought you g-guys d-didn't want anything t-to d-d-do with me because I don't p-p-play well."

Freddie slowed his step. He could see Kevin and Ernie crossing the street, having decided to join them. He remembered how the Babe had given the little boy a second chance despite the objections of his teammates.

"Well, maybe you just need a little extra help," Freddie added with encouragement. "And as Team Captain, that's what I'm here for—to give you all the help I can. So are you with me?"

"Sure thing!" Johnny said, beaming all over. "I'd like to be a part of your Team."

It was the first time Freddie hadn't heard Johnny stutter. It was a good beginning.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a new official record keeper," Freddie announced proudly to Kevin and Ernie as they joined them.

"Congratulations, Johnny!" they said, slapping him on the back.

"You know, I can't believe it," Johnny said without faltering. "This is like a dream I had last night."

Freddie grinned at his friends with a sigh of relief. "I'm willing to bet we're all going to dream a whole lot easier tonight."

THE END

FREDDIE BRENNER'S
MYSTICAL ADVENTURES

An Everyday Miracle



Chapter 3

An Everyday Miracle

Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday dear Freddie, Happy Birthday toooo youuuuu!” Wild and hearty applause rocked the room.

Freddie Brenner blushed with embarrassment. He watched his family and relatives proceed to shower him with hugs and kisses. Yuck! He was a year older today—almost a man, and his Aunt Margo was still squeezing him like some pudgy-cheeked baby.

“Freddie dear,” she cooed, ruffling his hair. “I have something special for you. Something I know you’ve wanted.”

There were lots of things he wanted. Take your pick. But he had a pretty good idea which one she’d sprung for. He watched his Aunt Margo retrieve a tall, odd-sized package she’d hidden behind the sofa. He let out a whoop and immediately seized it. It was a hockey stick! Even with wrapping paper, the shape was unmistakable. He’d really hoped for a new one. He quickly ripped off the colorful paper and ran his hand over the smooth hardwood surface. It was beautiful! Top of the line.

“Oooooohh,” echoed Freddie’s brother, Michael. He closed in for a better look, liking what he saw. “C’mon, let’s go to the park and try it out!”

“Good idea.”

But his dad stopped them. He had other plans. “Your mother and I have something we’d also like to give you.”

Freddie’s mom was glowing with anticipation. He knew whatever they had bought him had to be something special. He’d already searched every hiding place in the house hoping to find out what it was, but his mother was getting too clever for him. His search had come up empty-handed.

His dad left the room and came back carrying a large box wrapped all in purple paper with blue ribbon streamers hanging over the sides. “For you, son. Happy Birthday from both of us!”

Even though it was pretty as a picture and he knew his Mom had taken a lot of time wrapping it, he still tore into it in two seconds flat, ripping the paper to shreds. That was half the fun of getting presents.

“Wow!” he breathed, as his hands pushed past the tissue paper. Hidden inside was a canvas and aluminum frame backpack.

It was the deluxe model with extra compartments and a gazillion zippers. He’d seen it at the sporting goods store and had planned on buying it for his backpacking trip in six weeks. It was an expensive one and Freddie had saved every penny from his paper route money, hoping to have enough. But it was now his---thanks to his mom and dad.

“Gee, thanks!” he said, giving his parents each a hug. “It’s the best gift ever!” And, he meant it.

There were other gifts as well. His brother Michael gave him a new baseball; his Aunt Stella and Uncle Mark, a savings bond; and his Aunt Christine and Uncle John, a good dress shirt and tie for special occasions. But soon the grown-ups were off talking about things that didn’t interest him and Freddie was restless. After cake and gifts, it was pretty much downhill from there as far as birthdays went. Freddie eyed his brother who was still fingering Freddie’s new hockey stick.

“C’mon, Michael,” he said, feeling unusually generous. “Want to come to the park with me and try it out?”

Michael leaped to his feet, ready to follow his brother anywhere. It was a rare occasion he was ever invited along. He wasn’t going to pass up the chance.

Freddie grabbed his roller skates from the hall closet and slung them over his shoulder. He let Michael carry his new hockey stick while he toted his protective gear.

“I’m set. Let’s go!” he instructed, heading for the door.

“ALRIGHT!” Michael whooped, falling into step behind him.

The park was usually crowded most afternoons, but today Freddie didn’t see any of his friends playing hockey out on the basketball courts. Some other guys were playing, but nobody he knew.

“Hey, need another player?” he called out to a bunch of guys racing around the court in what appeared to be a ‘mean little game’ of hockey.

“You any good?” shouted a big guy whacking the puck across the court.

“One of the best!” Freddie boasted. Hey, it was his birthday. He felt like a million bucks today.

“Oh really?” the player said, giving Freddie the once-over. “Well then let’s see you show us what you can do,” he added, before turning back to the game in progress.

Michael tugged at Freddie’s sleeve. “Those guys—they don’t look so nice,” he whispered. “And they’re kind of big. I don’t know if you should be playing with them.”

Freddie couldn’t help but smile at his brother’s concern. If Michael wasn’t getting Freddie into some kind of trouble, then he was worrying about something terrible happening.

“Just stay here and watch my stuff,” Freddie instructed, putting on his skates. “I can handle anything. Just you watch. I’ll show these guys what *real* hockey is all about!”

Freddie put on his helmet, checked his protective pads, then grabbed the new hockey stick Aunt Margo had given him and raced onto the court.

“You play with those guys over there,” the big guy told him, nodding to his pals. “This way I can play against one of the very best.” He gave Freddie a sly look.

Freddie was a good hockey player, but he was an even better skater. He could skate circles around most people. He’d been skating almost since he’d started walking. His dad had taught him. Freddie’s dad had once been a skate guard at a roller rink when he was in high school. He’d shown Freddie a lot of tricks. Not once had Freddie ever had an accident.

But not long after getting into the game, Freddie knew something was different. He kept having to duck sticks and flying pucks. It was soon obvious that his team opponents were out for blood. And the more the game progressed, he felt sure it was *his* blood they were after. But he hung in there, vowing to show them Freddie Brenner wasn’t scared of any challenge.

The game was now close, very close, and Freddie had the puck in his possession. He raced madly across the court to make the goal. He was almost there when someone’s hockey stick lunged out and slammed him hard in the back of his legs. His right leg flew out from under him, sending him sprawling. His arm slammed into the pavement as he

took the fall. Even with the protective padding, he felt a sharp, tearing pain run up his arm. For a moment he saw stars.

Anger raced through him and he silently cursed. Someone had deliberately tripped him. He looked around to see who had done it. All he saw was a sea of grinning faces staring down at him.

He winced in pain as he tried to lift his arm.

“Looks like ‘one of the best’ just got creamed!” laughed the big guy.

“You did this!” Freddie shot back, wanting to fight. His hand was hurting like hell.

“If you can’t take the heat—then don’t play with fire,” jeered another player. “C’mon guys. This little guy’s finished!”

Still laughing, the players skated off, leaving him on the ground where he’d fallen.

Michael suddenly was hovering all over him. “Freddie I knew you shouldn’t have played with those guys. I had a feeling...”

Freddie kicked the hockey stick, madder than ever. “Oh, shut up Michael! Just help me up.”

Within the hour, Freddie Brenner was sitting in the emergency room of the City Hospital. His dad sat next to him. His left hand was swollen and throbbing non-stop. It hurt so bad that his eyes welled up with tears. It was becoming harder by the second to remain brave. Freddie shifted in his seat, looking again at the clock for the umpteenth time and wondering what was taking the doctor so long. It seemed like he’d been waiting forever. Hey, wasn’t this supposed to be an emergency room?

Finally, a nurse came into the waiting room carrying a chart and motioned for them to follow her. She led him and his dad through a hallway to an x-ray room where they took pictures of his arm. Freddie silently prayed that everything would be all right. He tried telling himself it was just a bad bruise. No way could it be broken.

Five minutes later, the doctor came back carrying the x-rays along with bad news. “It’s broken alright,” he said, putting the picture up on a light rack. He pointed to the dark line that indicated a break. “You broke your navicular bone—the one between your thumb and your index finger.”

The doctor switched off the light and turned to Freddie. “Most bones usually take about six weeks to heal...”

He breathed a sign of relief. Great! It would be healed just in time for his backpacking trip!

“But...” the doctor continued. “This bone is different.”

Freddie didn’t like the sound of that.

“The navicular bone is the most difficult bone in the hand to heal,” the doctor explained. “It takes six months to heal and then sometimes an operation is needed due to complications. Freddie, I’m afraid you’ll have to wear an arm cast for quite awhile.”

Freddie’s world suddenly collapsed. Six months in a cast! That meant missing the camping trip and not being able to play any sports! No baseball, no skating, no hockey—no swimming. Wearing a cast that long would take him right through summer as well. This would ruin all his plans. Why, this would ruin his whole life!

Freddie watched the doctor fit the cast all the way to his elbow. It looked like he’d broken every bone in his entire arm from the size of it.

“You’ll need the extra support,” the doctor explained. “We want to keep that bone as straight as possible to help it to heal right.”

Freddie stared at it saying nothing. Just hours ago he was in perfect shape. Now he was a total mess.

“C’mon, Son,” his dad said, leading him out to the car. “We might as well go home and give your mother the bad news.”

When they returned, his relatives were all still there waiting. His dad repeated what the doctor had said.

“Oh, you poor thing!” Aunt Margo exclaimed, fussing over him. “I should never have given you that dreadful hockey stick.” She plopped down in her chair looking as if she’d committed the worst of crimes.

“Freddie, maybe you’d better lie down for a while,” his mother advised, looking concerned.

Freddie felt pretty miserable, but lying down wasn’t what he had in mind. “Does this mean you’ll be returning the backpack you guys gave me?”

“Of course not,” his mother said.

Freddie brightened. “Does this mean I can still go on the camping trip?”

His parents exchanged worried glances.

“Freddie you heard what the doctor said. Your hand needs plenty of time to heal. You’re just going to have to wait until next year’s trip.”

Freddie wasn’t about to give up. “But Dad, it’s my left arm—not my right. See—look!” he said grabbing an unopened jar off the kitchen counter. He tried unscrewing the tightly sealed cap using only one hand. It was something that wasn’t as easy to do as he thought.

“And Dad,” he went on without stopping. “I’ve still got two perfectly good legs and that’s all I need for hiking. In six weeks my hand will be even stronger. Please Dad, please. Say it’s alright to go!”

Freddie knew he sounded desperate, but it was his birthday. He was counting on his dad not having the heart to say ‘no’ to him on his special day. It was obvious his dad already felt bad enough for him as it was.

“Well,” his dad began, carefully weighing his words. “If Mr. Kramer says its okay, then maybe I’ll reconsider.”

Freddie silently rejoiced. ‘Maybe’ was better than nothing. Now all he had to do was convince Mr. Kramer, the leader of the Explorer Club.

After a long day of explaining to everyone at school why he was suddenly wearing a cast, Freddie headed out for his troop leader’s house. Juggling his school books with one arm, he managed to ring the doorbell. He liked Mr. Kramer. Mr. Kramer had done years of mountain climbing and backpacking. And Freddie had really looked forward to learning a lot from him on their trip. So had all the other boys who belonged to the Explorer’s Club.

The door opened and Mr. Kramer looked down somewhat surprised to see him.

“Hello, Freddie. What brings you here today?”

Mr. Kramer’s eyes went directly to Freddie’s cast--a cast that was now filled with signatures and colorful graffiti.

“Oh,” he said, raising both eyebrows. “Had a run of bad luck, did you?”

“Yes,” Freddie admitted, telling him the story. “But it shouldn’t stop me from going on the trip,” he finished confidently.

Mr. Kramer shook his head. “I’m sorry Freddie. I can’t allow you to come with us on this trip. It’s very important that all my boys be in top physical shape. Each boy will have to rely on the other boys’ help and cooperation on those steep trails. And you’re in no shape for others to put their trust in you. Anything can happen and if you can’t lend both hands, you might be endangering someone else’s life. That’s a pretty big responsibility and not one to take lightly. It wouldn’t be fair to the other boys.”

“But Mr. Kramer, I have to go...”

“If your hand is healed by the time we leave, then it would be an entirely different story. But from what the doctor told you it would take a miracle to have your hand back to normal in six weeks time.”

Mr. Kramer stood firm. “I’m sorry Freddie, but that’s the way it has to be.”

Freddie knew Mr. Kramer was right. He just didn’t like hearing it, that’s all. He turned to go, his spirits at an all time low. At the corner, he saw Kevin and Ernie waiting to hear the verdict.

“What did he say?” Ernie prompted. “Can you still go?”

Freddie shook his head.

“Gee, that’s too bad,” Ernie added. “Tough break.”

“Kevin agreed. “Boy I’m sure glad it wasn’t me. I’d hate to miss all the fun we’re going to have.”

Kevin’s words were like an arrow going right to the target. Freddie hated being left out of anything. He hated missing all the fun and he hated Kevin for rubbing it in. He wanted to punch Kevin right in the face to shut him up. The only thing that stopped him was he’d probably break his good hand in the process and then he’d really be screwed. One broken hand was about all he could handle right now.

“Oh yeah?” Freddie shot back. “You poor suckers won’t be having anywhere near the fun I’m going to have. Why, my dad told me just this morning that if Mr. Kramer said ‘no’ then I could come along with him and his buddies on the white water rafting trip they’re planning,” he boldly lied.

He felt a secret pleasure at the stunned, surprised looks on both Ernie and Kevin's face.

"Man, talk about real fun," he bragged. "You shoot down those rapids as fast as a race car. Next to that, the explorer trip is kid's stuff."

Without giving his friends a chance to respond to his unexpected news, Freddie immediately took his leave.

"Got to go now. I've got lots of things to do before my big trip. See you guys tomorrow." He raced up the street still wearing a smug, gloating smile.

At home, Freddie locked himself in his room and brooded. So what if he'd told a whopper of a lie. He hoped that they'd all have a rotten time without him. He hoped it would rain nonstop the entire trip. If he couldn't have fun, he certainly didn't want anyone else to have any fun either. Right now he was mad at the world, at his friends, and especially at Mr. Kramer for telling him he couldn't go. He was even mad that he didn't really have a real white water rafting trip to go on.

Mr. Kramer's words kept running through his mind like a broken record. It would take a miracle for his hand to heal in six weeks. A miracle! Yes, that's what he needed—a miracle!

He kicked a basketball around the room, venting his frustration until he heard his mother holler from the other room to cut out the racket. He stopped and plopped down on his bed. Fat chance of a miracle happening to *him*—Freddie Brenner! He figured that stuff was only reserved for saints, and he'd be the first to admit he was far from being called 'saintly material'.

He left his room and headed out the back door toward his tree house. He always went there when he needed to think things over. Freddie was just about to climb the steps when he saw Melissa ride up on her bike. She hopped off and quickly held up her right hand for him to see. It sported a newly bandaged and splinted middle finger.

She smiled sheepishly. "They say misery loves company. Looks like you're not alone anymore."

Freddie couldn't believe it. He'd seen Melissa at school only a few hours ago. Her finger had been fine then—no bandage. She'd even drawn a cute little picture of him on his cast with that same hand. What had happened?

“It was the darnest thing,” she said, picking up the direction of his thoughts. “I wasn’t paying attention and I slammed the drawer right on my finger. I felt so stupid. The doctor says it’s broken.”

Freddie shook his head. Yes, he certainly knew about doctors and broken bones. It suddenly dawned on him what this meant for Melissa.

“What about your piano competition?” He knew how hard she’d been practicing for the school contest. It was only two weeks off. Freddie thought she was terrific on the piano, but he knew she had her doubts about that. Still, he always thought she’d probably win without a problem.

Melissa bit her bottom lip. Freddie knew she was upset. It seemed as if he wasn’t the only one with troubles.

“I think I’m going to have to withdraw from the competition, Freddie. I could never play those difficult compositions with my finger like this. I just wouldn’t stand a chance against all the other contestants.”

Freddie glanced from his cast to her bandaged finger.

“It looks like we both have lousy timing. I can’t go on the explorer trip and you can’t play in your competition. So, now what do we do?”

Melissa was just about to say something, but stopped.

“Darn!” she said under her breath. He could tell by the way she cocked her head that she was listening to something only she could hear. Melissa had that special gift of being able to read people’s thoughts and know things before they happened. He figured she was picking up some signal right now.

“I’ve got to go, Freddie,” she said, jumping back on her bike. “I’m late and my mom wants me home for dinner right now. I’m sorry about your hand. I guess I haven’t been much help talking about my finger. I don’t know what I’m going to do. The only thing we can both do right now is pray for a miracle or something.”

Freddie watched Melissa ride off down the block. He slowly turned to climb his tree house steps. Lost in thought, he hoisted himself to the top and let himself inside. For the second time that day, he’d been told it would take a miracle to change his situation. Right now he’d heard just about all he could take of ‘miracle’ talk.

It just wasn't fair! He'd worked so hard for this trip—saving his paper route money, mowing lawns in the neighborhood. Freddie felt that familiar rise of anger swell up in him again. He was mad at the whole world today. Miracles! Humph! If he could work miracles....

"The world is full of miracles, Freddie," a voice said, seeming to come out of no where. "Only the world won't be helping you make any miracles if you're going to be mad at it."

Freddie quickly glanced around the tree house only to see Daniel, his angelic spirit guide, materialize right in front of his eyes. As always he recognized that now familiar New York Yankees hat that Daniel liked to wear.

Daniel always seemed to pop up when Freddie had a problem or was in some real mess. Freddie felt kind of glad to see him now. He guessed this was definitely one of those problem times.

It wasn't often that Daniel appeared to him when Freddie was fully awake. But here he was, just as real as could be. Daniel was pretty smart for a spirit guide, and Freddie knew he couldn't hide anything from him. In fact, he was pretty sure Daniel already knew the run down on how he'd broken his hand.

Daniel looked at Freddie's cast, shaking his head. "Freddie, nothing is impossible. If you want something bad enough you *can* work what *you* call a miracle."

"Yeah? And if I could work miracles I'd be God," Freddie said.

"But you're a part of God," Daniel pointed out. "He's always with you. So who says you can't work some small miracles of your own?"

Freddie wasn't buying it. "How?" he shot back.

"Lesson number one," Daniel began, "is that anger only makes you feel worse and angry people cannot work miracles. You can only work miracles by feeling good inside. Relax and let go of those things that upset you. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. That helps."

Freddie didn't really want to be mad. He wanted to feel good. Only it wasn't all that easy with everything going wrong around him. He took in a deep breath and let it out just like Daniel had suggested. He was somewhat surprised. It *did* make him feel a little better.

“Okay, now what’s next?” Freddie asked. He was anxious to get going on this miracle thing.

Daniel appeared thoughtful. “First let me tell you something that all the great scientists know. This world we live in and everything in it is made up of energy. People are made up of energy, and so are plants, animals, and so forth. Energy is a special power inside you—sort of like a wire with electricity running through it. You can’t light a lamp unless you make the right electrical connection to turn on the power. People are like that, too. They have a lot of power inside them only most of the time they don’t know how to turn it on and make it work for them.”

Freddie had learned about electricity in science class, but he didn’t know people had some kind of power in them as well.

“This power sends out vibrations like ripples in a pond after you throw a stone into the water,” Daniel explained. “Some vibrations are strong and some are weak.”

Freddie interrupted him. “How do you know that people have these vibrations?”

“Sometimes scientists can see and measure them with special equipment, but sometimes you can feel them. A perfect example was when your brother Michael told you yesterday that he felt you shouldn’t be playing hockey with those other boys. Michael didn’t know those boys personally, but he sensed that their vibrations were not totally trustworthy.”

“But what does this have to do with healing my hand?” Freddie asked impatiently.

“Just as there are good and not so good vibrations in the world—there are also certain vibrations that help people heal faster. You just have to know how to use them and you’ll be able to help heal yourself. It’s all a part of the power people have inside them that I was telling you about. Some people don’t believe they have any power, but they do. They just don’t know how to turn it on and use it properly. God gave everyone that power. The only thing is that he decided to have a little fun and let you discover it for yourself.”

Freddie’s mind was racing. He was getting excited. We *all* had the power to heal ourselves. He couldn’t wait to get started. He wondered if there was some kind of instruction book he’d have to buy.

“No, Freddie,” Daniel said, reading his thoughts. “It’s not nearly as difficult as people think. The very first step is that you must tell yourself—plant in your mind—that your hand is already healed. This is because your mind is like a giant computer terminal. If you program it that your hand is already whole again, it will send those messages to your body and your body will speed up the healing—and that’s because it wants to obey your mind.”

Daniel paused to make a point. “But it’s very important that you block out thoughts of your hand being broken. Think of it only as already healed and brand new. Otherwise the messages sent to your body get all confused.”

It sounded so easy. “But can my hand really heal that fast?” Freddie wanted to know.

“Try it and see for yourself,” Daniel answered with a smile. “But if you’re really serious about learning the secrets of energetic healing, I’ll show you tonight.”

“You’re on,” Freddie answered. And with that, Daniel was gone.

Freddie counted the hours until bedtime. His mother wondered if he was getting sick, even felt his forehead, when Freddie announced he was going to bed early that night. He knew they had good reason to be shocked by his behavior. Freddie usually tried to stay up as late as he could get away with.

So there he was—lights out, tucked in bed, the hands of his night table clock showing 10:00 pm and still no sign of Daniel. The time ticked by, getting later and later until Freddie could hardly keep his eyes open any longer. He hoped Daniel hadn’t forgotten him. He finally couldn’t stay awake any longer and drifted off into a deep, deep sleep.

The next thing he knew, he was in a large, brightly lit waiting room. Everything was white except for a gold-lettered sign on the wall which read:

Dr. Whitehaven
Universal Healer of Mind, Body & Spirit
“The Good Doctor is IN”

Freddie didn't have the slightest idea where he was. Was he supposed to wait here for Daniel? He spun around hearing footsteps behind him and saw Daniel approaching.

“I thought you'd never fall asleep,” Daniel said.

“But I thought...”

“Yes, I know. But these special trips can only be arranged when your body is sleeping. It makes it easier for your spirit to travel to other places.”

Freddie was itching to ask where it was his spirit had traveled to when quite unexpectedly a very beautiful woman, with hair the color of golden silk, appeared.

Daniel looked quite pleased to see her. Freddie wondered if spirit guides had girlfriends. Was this Daniel's girlfriend? If so, she sure was hot looking. He strained to hear as they hurriedly discussed something in hushed tones. He saw Daniel nod his head in agreement to something the woman said. Then as quickly as she came, the beautiful woman left.

Freddie didn't waste any time in satisfying his curiosity. He had to know who the mysterious woman was. “Was that your girlfriend?” he blurted out.

“That was a special friend of mine,” Daniel answered with a twinkle in his eye that Freddie didn't miss. “She's also a very special friend of someone else you know. That was Angela, Melissa's spirit guide.”

“*That* was Angela?” Freddie echoed in surprise.

He'd heard Melissa talk about Angela a number of times, but he'd never seen her before. Just wait until he told Melissa whom he had run into.

“You won't have long to wait,” Daniel grinned, reading Freddie's thoughts. “Melissa will be joining us shortly. Angela had an emergency to attend to right way, but she wanted Melissa to also learn about healing. We thought that since you're friends, you might want to learn and experience it together. And I'd take both of you.”

The news was good news. Having Melissa join them would be fun. As if on cue, Melissa appeared in the waiting room wearing a big grin.

“Freddie! What luck! Angela told me I’d be going with both of you.”

Daniel beckoned to them. “Dr. Whitehaven is waiting for us. Are you ready?”

Freddie exchanged quick glances with Melissa. “We’re ready.”

Daniel led them down a long white corridor. Freddie wondered if they might be entering some kind of top secret complex. He must have been thinking pretty loudly, for Daniel just as quickly answered. “This place isn’t secret at all, Freddie. It’s open to anyone who wants to learn. Sooner or later people find their way here just as you and Melissa have right now. People come when they’re ready.”

As they reached the end of the long corridor, Freddie saw an open set of double doors. But this was no ordinary doorway. This door had no walls supporting it and on the other side was nothing but white mist.

Freddie and Melissa both hesitated, not knowing what to do.

“Your answers are through that door,” Daniel told them, “But you’ve got to decide to take the first step.”

Without further thought, Freddie reached for Melissa’s hand just as she reached for his. He guessed they both needed reassurance for what lay beyond. He was glad he wasn’t alone. He would like to have said ‘ladies first’ but somehow he knew Melissa wouldn’t have let him get away with it. He felt her nudge him and together they stepped over the threshold.

There had been no need for fear or anxiety. On the other side they found themselves in what appeared to be just another room. There were many people in this rather large room that seemed to have all the colors of the rainbow in it. Color seemed to be everywhere. Freddie had the feeling this was some kind of giant research laboratory and the people were involved in some kind of experimentation work. What interested him most was the huge screen that took up an entire wall. It immediately lit up as he and Melissa stepped into the room. It showed a computerized image of two human bodies. Different colors seemed to radiate from certain spots on their bodies.

“Those images show everything that’s happening inside you even before it shows up on the outside.”

Freddie's eyes grew bigger as he viewed his body image. "Wow. How'd they do that?"

Daniel pointed to the door they'd just entered. "That door is sensitive to your body's energy and it showed up on that screen in different colors. This place is the center for color healing. The doctors here know how to read those colors so they can tell right away what's wrong in your body and where to find it. Sometimes when the color is cloudy or brown it means that person has something out of whack happening in that part of their body. We call it disharmony."

"Disharmony?" Melissa questioned.

"It means the person might have something there that's keeping him or her from being in harmony with nature, from being healthy and strong. Come over here and let's take a closer look," Daniel suggested.

They watched as Daniel pointed out that the color around Freddie's broken hand and Melissa's broken finger was not flowing smoothly. It wasn't as bright as the colors around other parts of their bodies, which glowed with a healthy brilliance.

Melissa's eyes darted all over the chart for her body. She could see there wasn't any color, just a shadow, where her tonsils used to be.

"That's because you had them removed," Daniel explained. "Since there aren't any tonsils inside you, there's nothing there to radiate color back on the screen."

Freddie glanced back at his chart and noticed an area where the color wasn't nearly as bright as Melissa's same area on her image.

"What's this?" Freddie worried, pointing to a spot.

"Those are your kidneys, Freddie. It means that you need to drink a lot more water to keep your system cleansed in order to keep your kidneys in top shape. It shows you could use improvement in that area."

Freddie kept quiet. His mother was always telling him he never drank enough water. Now he was witnessing proof of it.

"This is incredible," Melissa whispered in awe. "It's better than x-ray machines."

"That it is! That it is!" Came a wise old-sounding voice behind them.

Freddie and Melissa spun around to face a silver-haired gentleman whose moustache curled up enticingly at both ends.

“Are you Dr. Whitehaven?” Freddie asked.

“That I am,” the Doctor answered with a twinkle in his eye and a broad smile. “Daniel tells me that both of you are in need of a little bone repair.”

“Can you heal me right away?” Freddie began, getting straight to the point. “You see, I’ve got only six weeks to fix my hand or I can’t go on the explorer trip. All the guys are going and the doctor told me it would take six months and...”

“Whoa there!” Dr. Whitehaven said heading him off. “Yes. I could fix your hand and I could fix Melissa’s finger, but it would only be temporary. To make it last, you must do it yourself. Only you can control your body, Freddie. Many people believe that the only answers to sickness are drugs and costly treatment. But healing has to first come from within, not without. Look over here...” Dr. Whitehaven pointed.

They saw a man resting in a big easy chair, his eyes closed and a soft pool of emerald green light shining down on his chest area.

“What’s wrong with him?” Melissa asked curiously. “And why is he using that green-colored light?”

Dr. Whitehaven showed Freddie and Melissa a color chart on the wall. “Each part of your body has a special healing color assigned to help it. That man over there had lung cancer and a green healing light will help restore the healthiness to that part of his body. The color cleanses and restores the proper energy to that part of his body. If that man’s body were lit up on the screen right now instead of yours, you’d see the color getting stronger and brighter around his lung area, healing him back to health. The color green is a very strong healing color. Just like red gives you energy when we’re tired, blue calms us down when we’re over excited. Color helps us in a number of ways.”

Freddie had so many questions looking over the color chart. It was hard to know where to begin. “What if you don’t know what color to use?” he asked, seeing that the chart showed about seven different colors.

Dr Whitehaven looked thoughtful. “I’d say a pure white light would then be the best. Let your mind surround that part of you that needs to be healed in a pure white, glowing light and it will begin the healing process.”

Freddie was distracted when Melissa uttered a small gasp of delight. She was picking up something again. Her eyes were fairly dancing with excitement.

“Oh, Freddie. Listen.”

Freddie’s ears perked up. Ever so softly, music began filling the room. It was beautiful music that made all the hair on the back of his neck tingle—a good tingling—not like some scary movie. He knew from Melissa’s expression that she was feeling the same thing.

“Where’s that music coming from?” Freddie asked.

“They’re doing some experiments in the garden again,” the doctor said matter-of-factly.

The music was unusually beautiful. Freddie couldn’t help wonder what kind of experiments were going on. He was just about to ask when Melissa beat him to it.

“That music,” she said. “It sounds so familiar. I know I’ve heard it before...” Freddie could tell that she was trying hard to place it. Then recognition dawned.

“It couldn’t be!” Her eyes lit up. “Is it Beethoven?”

Dr. Whitehaven smiled. “You’re right. And, I also believe Amadeus Mozart and John Lennon.”

“From the Beatles!” Melissa, gasped, her eyes growing big like saucers. Freddie’s mouth dropped open in astonishment. “Wow!” was all he managed to get out. And to think they were all working on a project with Dr. Whitehaven.

Melissa turned to Daniel, a question clearly on her mind.

Daniel understood immediately. “Sure,” he answered. “I think it would be okay if we drop in on our musicians for awhile and see what they’re up to.”

In a twinkling of an eye, Freddie and Melissa found themselves in a lush tropical garden paradise along with Daniel and Dr. Whitehaven. Flowers with soft petals the size of Freddie’s head grew all around them—orchids, roses, irises, and so many more. Freddie had never seen flowers that big before or color that dazzling. What could cause flowers to grow so extraordinarily beautiful? Their fragrance seemed to overwhelm his very senses.

Together they followed Daniel down a short garden path that opened up onto a veranda. He could see a number of men trying different musical renditions on a variety of instruments. He could tell these musicians were enjoying what they were doing and we’re getting into the music they were creating. Freddie loved the piece they were

working on now. It had great sound. Next to him, he detected Melissa mentally recording every note she heard.

“Music is also a very important part of healing,” Dr. Whitehaven explained. “Not only does it make you feel good, but it also relaxes you. And it’s very important to be in a relaxed mood if you want your body to heal.”

Freddie could feel the music right now through his whole body. He wished he had his tape recorder so all his friends could hear how great it sounded.

“These flowers that you see were once very small and sickly, so they brought them here to heal,” Daniel explained, pointing to the beauty surrounding them. “But with certain musical notes, they grew healthy and strong and bigger than ever. People respond to music just like plants do. But we have to watch what type of music we listen to. Some music doesn’t make us feel as good as other kinds do. Usually you can feel the difference right away.”

“So those guys are working on music to make plants grow strong?” Freddie asked, watching John Lennon work out a series of chords on the piano.

“That’s right,” the Doctor said. “They’re helping us compose healing music. But there are so many different ways to begin healing. Human beings need sun and fresh air. We need exercise and healthy foods. We need good positive thoughts about our self and others. God gave each of us a body, and he gave us the responsibility to take care of it. That’s our department, not his. When something goes wrong, it’s because we need to change something we may be doing that’s not good for us. A lot of times it means changing our thoughts.”

“But why did I break my finger?” Melissa asked.

“And why did I break my hand?” Freddie also chimed in.

Daniel turned first to Melissa. “Try to remember the one thing you thought about more than anything else this week. Can you think of what it was?”

Melissa frowned trying to think back. “I thought about the competition and...”

Daniel probed further. “Did you think you’d win?”

“No,” Melissa admitted softly. “I thought I’d surely be all thumbs and screw up and miss a note or something.”

“Thoughts are very powerful,” Daniel explained. “We have to be careful what we think, because that’s what we’re programming into our minds. When you thought about your fingers being clumsy and messing up, they did exactly what you focused on. You then became clumsy and slammed the drawer on them. See how the mind works? You have to change your thoughts first. Negative thoughts can attract accidents and illnesses.”

Freddie was suddenly thinking about his own situation. Although he hadn’t admitted it to his brother Michael—he *had* been pretty scared playing hockey with those older boys who he feared would surely beat him. And yes, he *had* been scared of being shown up and making a fool of himself—even laughed at. He even feared getting hurt. And every fear he’d thought about he’d actually attracted to him and made happen. He shook his head not realizing how powerful his thoughts were.

“I thought you’d understand,” Daniel said. “But remember—from everything bad can come something good. Your experience has led you to find out about your own inner healing powers.”

Dr. Whitehaven placed a gentle hand on both Freddie and Melissa’s shoulders. “There will be other times and even more wonderful things to learn the next time you come back. Just remember to think positively, picture the result you want to see in your mind, and don’t forget to use color and music with joy...”

Daniel’s head suddenly perked up as he listened to some far away signal. “Freddie, Melissa—it’s time to go,” he said. “You’ll be waking up very soon now.”

“But I wanted to actually meet Beethoven and all the others,” Melissa added somewhat disappointed.

“And isn’t there more secret stuff we have to learn?” Freddie added, stalling for time. He didn’t want to go yet either.

But Daniel seemed to be in a hurry. “Remember and think about all you’ve seen and heard. There are no hidden secrets, only the natural way of nature and the healing universe. These truths are yours. Use them and live by them. Then the power will be yours.”

Freddie felt dizzy, very dizzy. Melissa, Daniel and Dr. Whitehaven were getting fuzzier by the minute. As if he were miles away, he heard Daniel call out to him. “I’ll be checking on your progress, Freddie.”

And then darkness enveloped him. Moments later he woke up in his own room to a new morning—a new beginning.

It was Saturday--a glorious, glorious Saturday. No school, no worries, just two whole days of blissful freedom. Not that Freddie hated school. It’s just that he loved Saturdays more.

Freddie didn’t jump out of bed immediately like he usually did on Saturday mornings. He wanted to think about Dr. Whitehaven and all the things he and Melissa had seen. Daniel had said to stop, remember and think about all he had observed. The keys to healing were positive thinking, creating healthy images in your mind, and using music and color. It sounded like a big task. How, he wondered, could he use all of them to help heal his hand? He thought and thought and then in a flash he leaped out of bed, waving his cast high in the air like a warrior going into battle. He had an idea. He, Freddie Brenner, *would* work a miracle. After all, didn’t miracles happen every day?

Freddie wasted no time getting dressed. He encountered Michael, already on his way out the kitchen door. His arms were loaded with the usual assortment of toy military men and trucks.

“Hey,” Freddie stopped him. “Where is everybody?” Michael kept on going. “Dad’s in the garage and Mom’s doing laundry,” he shouted back.

Freddie decided to talk to his mother first. Downstairs in the basement he found her sorting clothes. She looked up as he came down the stairs.

“How’s your hand?” she asked, throwing a new load into the washer.

“About my hand...” Freddie began. “Mom, do you think I can get a copy of the x-ray the doctor took?”

His mother stopped what she was doing and looked at him strangely. “Whatever for?”

He didn't know if he was ready to fully explain things to her just yet. He did some fast thinking instead. He told her he wanted to study the x-ray and use it in an experiment he was conducting. It was the truth—just not the whole truth.

“Who knows, Mom. This might just lead to me wanting to be a doctor or something someday,” he added for good measure.

His mother was not so easily convinced. She frowned. “And what in the world am I going to tell the doctor? I'm sure he'll think I'm crazy for asking.”

Freddie flashed his most charming smile. “Tell him your son is a budding genius and that you're helping him to expand his medical mind.”

“Yeah, right,” she laughed. “I guess I could stop by his office on the way to the grocery store.”

“Thanks, Mom. You're great!” he said and dashed back up the stairs.

Next stop—Freddie's dad.

Mr. Brenner was not in the garage as Michael had informed him, but in the backyard turning the soil in preparation for this year's flower beds.

“What's up?” his dad asked, wiping his hands on his jeans.

Freddie braced himself for the hardest part of his plan. “Dad, I need to ask a very big favor.”

His dad raised an eyebrow and waited. Freddie had his complete and undivided attention.

“Dad,” he began, “I'd like to use your stereo system for a project I'm working on. I'll be real careful with it. I promise. It's just really important,” he said in a rush before his dad could object.

His dad looked thoughtful. “What kind of project?”

Freddie took a deep breath. “Well it has to do with musical vibrations and their healing effect on human beings.”

Well, that sounded scientific enough, Freddie thought, plowing forward.

“And,” he continued. “I would need to use it for about 30 minutes each day. Oh, and I also need to borrow some of your CD's too,” he finished.

Freddie could just about read the thoughts running through his dad's head. He was probably thinking about how expensive all his equipment was wondering whether Freddie would somehow mess it up. He was clearly weighing the risks.

Freddie caught himself right there. *No!* He was going to think positively about everything. His dad *would* let him use his stereo. He kept that thought strongly in mind while he watched his dad decide.

After what seemed like forever, his dad finally shrugged. "Alright. I'm going to trust you to be responsible with it."

Freddie let out a sigh of relief. So far, so good.

"Thanks Dad. You won't be sorry. I promise."

He was so excited he immediately called Melissa and told her to come right over. Two heads were better than one. She had some ideas of her own that also sounded pretty good.

"Freddie, I asked my dad what he thought about color affecting people," she told him as soon as she got inside his house, "and he told me that he read in a magazine how they once painted the inside walls of a prison with pink paint and the men stopped fighting. They actually got calmer. My dad says that scientists are beginning to find out a lot about how music and color affects us—only some people aren't ready to believe it yet. Just think. What we saw last night might be a glimpse into the future. Years from now, doctors may not use all those medicines and machines. Everyone will know how to help heal themselves."

It was quite a thought. Maybe years from now things *would* be a lot different. But right now they needed to put their own plan into action. They started that very day.

First they decided to pick out the right kind of music. In his dad's study they went through his music collection to see what might work. Freddie picked one of his favorites. The music was from an old movie he'd once seen about a long-distance runner who overcame all odds to race to victory. The music always made him feel good—like he was running the race himself.

Next he took one of his dad's sound speakers and laid it flat on the floor. Freddie wanted to feel the music's vibrations through his whole body, so he placed his arm cast on top of the speaker. Melissa placed her broken finger on it as well.

They sat there for a moment to quiet themselves and relax. Freddie took a few deep breaths and was ready. Each sat on the floor, their backs up against the wall and their arms on the speaker. They closed their eyes as the music began. It started out slowly and softly at first, but then built in intensity. As it did, Freddie started to feel warm pulsing vibrations race up the arm that rested on the stereo speaker. From his arm it spread up through his whole body and with that Freddie started creating pictures in his mind.

He pictured himself without his arm cast. He pictured his hand healthy and whole. He saw himself swimming underwater, his hand slicing through the cool, clear water like an Olympic swimmer. He saw himself conducting a symphony orchestra at Carnegie Hall, his hand waving the baton to instruct each note being played. He saw himself running up the foothills of these giant mountains and then beginning to scale the highest peaks. He pictured his hand strong as it grasped each new hold in the rock. He pictured his hand strong enough to lift him up to each new foothold. And through each of Freddie's pictures of the mind, he surrounded his hand in a glowing white light that seemed to guide his way to the mountaintop. He pictured himself taking off, flying through the air, his arms spread out so he could soar on the currents with the freedom of a bird. He felt free. He felt healthy and strong. He felt very much alive.

As the music came to an end, Freddie sat still and let himself just relax. He opened his eyes, amazed at how much better he felt already. He had really enjoyed every minute of the great movie he'd created in his mind. He looked over at Melissa who sat with her eyes still closed. He wondered what his friends would think if they could see the two of them now.

"They'd think we were crazy," Melissa laughed, opening her eyes. "But when we're finished they won't. I think it's working. I feel great."

Freddie turned off his dad's stereo, put the speaker back in its place, and together they walked into the kitchen where he saw his mom coming through the door carrying groceries.

"Why hello, Melissa," she said, surprised at seeing her there.

"Hello, Mrs. Brenner," Melissa smiled.

“Oh, before I forget—here,” she said handing Freddie a large brown envelope that had been tucked under her arm. “I was right. The doctor thought I was nuts asking for it.”

The x-ray! Freddie grabbed it and ran to his room, forgetting all else and leaving Melissa in the temporary hands of his puzzled mother. Like a surgeon, he carefully studied the dark little jagged line showing where his bone had been broken.

Daniel had told him never to see or think of it as broken. So Freddie ran to his mother’s desk and got out a little white bottle of correction fluid. With a steady hand, he put a dab of the white fluid over the jagged line on the x-ray where the break was. He would “white it out” on the x-ray just as he would do so in his mind. The bone break would cease to exist for him. Now even the x-ray showed his hand was healed and whole. He looked up to see his mother standing just outside the door to his room.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said tacking it up on his bulletin board where he’d always see it every morning and every night.

Freddie suddenly remembered his friend. “Where’s Melissa?”

“She said she needed to get home and practice her piano. Imagine that,” his mother added. “How she’ll play with a broken finger is beyond me.”

Freddie smiled. That was Melissa, all right. She was not going to let a broken finger get in her way. And so, like Melissa, Freddie’s plan took shape and grew.

Every day he’d do his little exercise with the stereo, changing and adding pictures in his head, creating his own healing movie of the mind. When the kids at school asked him when his cast would come off, he didn’t say ‘in six months’ like the doctor had told him. Instead, he told his friends ‘any day now’ and the more he said it, the more he believed it to be true.

“Hey, when are you going on that white water rafting trip you were telling us about?” Kevin inquired, reminding Freddie of the lie he had originally made up.

“There is no rafting trip,” Freddie said. “The only trip I’m going to be going on is the explorer’s trip,” he added confidently. And he was determined to make it come true, too.

Freddie tried different music after his family complained about hearing the same selection over and over again. But Freddie always picked music that was inspiring and made him feel good all over. And always he surrounded himself in pure, glowing white light that felt like a warm blanket around him.

His parents were behind him 100 percent. As his dad had said, “You have nothing to lose by trying.”

He had nothing to lose and everything to win—his trip. He’d sit and visualize once, sometimes twice a day. And he even pictured himself on the explorer’s trip with an already healed hand.

In the two weeks that followed, Freddie saw very little of Melissa outside of school. She practiced her piano nonstop.

“I’m going to be in that competition no matter what,” she told him. Her mind was clearly made up. “I’m going to play that piano like I never have before.”

Her finger came out of its bandaged splint the very day of the competition. The doctor removed it two weeks earlier than expected because the bone had healed so quickly. He warned her that it would be stiff for a while.

“But it’s not stiff at all,” she confided to him, grinning from ear to ear. “And tonight this finger is going to play some serious music!”

Freddie went to the school auditorium to watch the piano competition that night. It wasn’t something he normally would have gone out of his way to attend, but it was kind of special this time. Melissa had told him she had a surprise for him.

Freddie couldn’t resist a surprise and so he sat in his seat in the crowded auditorium, dressed in the new dress shirt his Aunt Christine had given him for his birthday. In his pocket was the rolled up neck tie which he had quickly ditched the minute he had turned the corner and was out of sight of his mother’s eyes. He’d wanted to go in his t-shirt and jeans, but she’d said ‘absolutely not’.

He was restless waiting for Melissa’s turn to arrive. He’d only heard one contestant he thought was any good. When Melissa’s time came, she walked on stage in a snowy-white dress with emerald green ribbon streamers cascading down the back of her long curly hair. Emerald green—a good healing color. He knew she had specifically chosen it.

Freddie felt as nervous for her as if he was up there on the stage himself. She sat down at the grand piano, hesitated for only a second then began to play. He didn't have long to wait for his surprise. It practically jolted him out of his seat. Melissa was playing the very same piece they'd heard together in the flower garden--the original one by John Lennon. She *had* been memorizing every note after all! People were looking through their program trying to find out what it was called. After her name it simply said "Heavenly Healing."

Freddie laughed secretly to himself. If these people only knew they were hearing the unpublished joint efforts of some of the world's most brilliant musicians and composers. He wondered how Melissa could sit there and keep a straight face.

Of course, Melissa's version didn't sound exactly like "They" had played it, but it was darn close. Freddie thought it sounded pretty terrific all the same. He noticed it seemed to have an effect on people. They looked kind of dreamy-eyed.

When she finished the piece there was a tremendous round of applause and Freddie heard a few people asking others who the composer was.

When the results were announced, Melissa came in a close second, almost a tie. She hadn't won, but no one would ever have known it to look at her.

"But I *did* win, Freddie," she explained. "I was only competing against myself. I made myself play better than I ever have before in my life, despite having to overcome a broken finger in the process. I think that's a real victory. Next year I'm going to be even better!"

She reached into her dress pocket and pulled out a tape cassette and handed it to Freddie.

"It's the piece I played tonight," she told him. "Their music helped me. I'd like you to have it now. The bone you broke is a much tougher one to heal than mine was. Maybe this will help you as well."

During the next few weeks, Freddie practiced his healing techniques daily. He used Melissa's music and just about everything else Daniel and Dr. Whitehaven had taught him. For five weeks he'd had his hand in a cast, but he knew those days were quickly drawing to an end. Tomorrow he had an appointment with the doctor and he was nervous. His hand didn't hurt anymore. It felt great and he knew from testing its

strength that it felt stronger than ever. But what would the doctor say? He wished he knew. The suspense was killing him.

That night he woke up in the middle of the night to see Daniel sitting at the foot of his bed.

“Well, Freddie, you really are a fast learner after all. I’m quite proud of you.”

Freddie couldn’t smile. “Yes, but will I heal it in time to go on the trip?” he asked Daniel.

Daniel smiled. “You’ll see,” he winked, and then he was gone.

At the doctor’s office the next day, Freddie paced back and forth across the waiting room as he waited for his new x-ray to come back.

“Stop! Enough already!” his mother complained. “You’re wearing me out, just watching you.”

Just then the nurse called them back into the examining room where the doctor was still studying the x-ray on a light rack. Freddie watched the doctor turn around, shaking his head in bewilderment.

“Well, Freddie,” he began, searching for words. “Something quite unusual has happened, and I don’t know how to explain it. I’ve seen a lot of broken bones in my day. Bones that never healed properly, but it appears your hand is...”

“It’s healed, isn’t it?” Freddie yelled out with a wild whoop that echoed through the doctor’s offices.

The doctor scratched his head. “Yes. It’s the strangest thing, but the x-ray shows that the bone has mended together perfectly. I’ve never seen it happen quite this quickly before—not a bone of this sort and not in five weeks time. I guess sometimes nature works her own miracles.”

Yes. A miracle! Freddie’s very own miracle.

Freddie was bursting with excitement. He wanted to run and jump, do hand springs and shout his healing victory to the world. It was hard to sit still waiting for the doctor to take off his cast, feeling like he did.

He did the hand exercises just like the doctor showed him and within two days time he had total strength back in his hand. It felt stronger than ever.

“Looks like someone’s going to make his trip after all,” his dad said, bringing Freddie’s new backpack out of the closet. “Son, it looks like you’d better start packing.”

Freddie wished Daniel were around right now to thank him for all his help. And just as he thought that, he had the feeling that Daniel *was* there. He looked up from his backpack and saw Daniel stretched out on Michael’s bed, watching both him and his dad. It surprised Freddie and yet he felt an odd sense of excitement at the prospect of his dad meeting his Guide.

His dad suddenly looked up and Freddie carefully watched his face for signs of recognition. Would his dad also be able to see Daniel?

His dad had a somewhat puzzled look on his face. It looked like he was about to say something, then changed his mind. At that same moment, his mother called upstairs that his dad had a telephone call. The moment was lost as his dad left the room.

“Did he see you?” Freddie asked eagerly.

“No. But he felt my presence,” Daniel answered. “It’s a beginning.”

Freddie wished everyone could see Daniel. He wanted to tell the world what a wonderful friend he had.

“Can I tell people about you?” Freddie asked, wondering what would happen if they knew. Would they think him crazy?

“Someday they’ll all know, Freddie. But maybe right now they’re not ready yet. Sometimes it’s especially hard for grown-ups to believe, but let me tell you that there are a lot of grown-ups out there right now who knew their Guides just as you know me. They’ve just kept it a secret, that’s all.”

So others knew the secret as well. It was comforting to know.

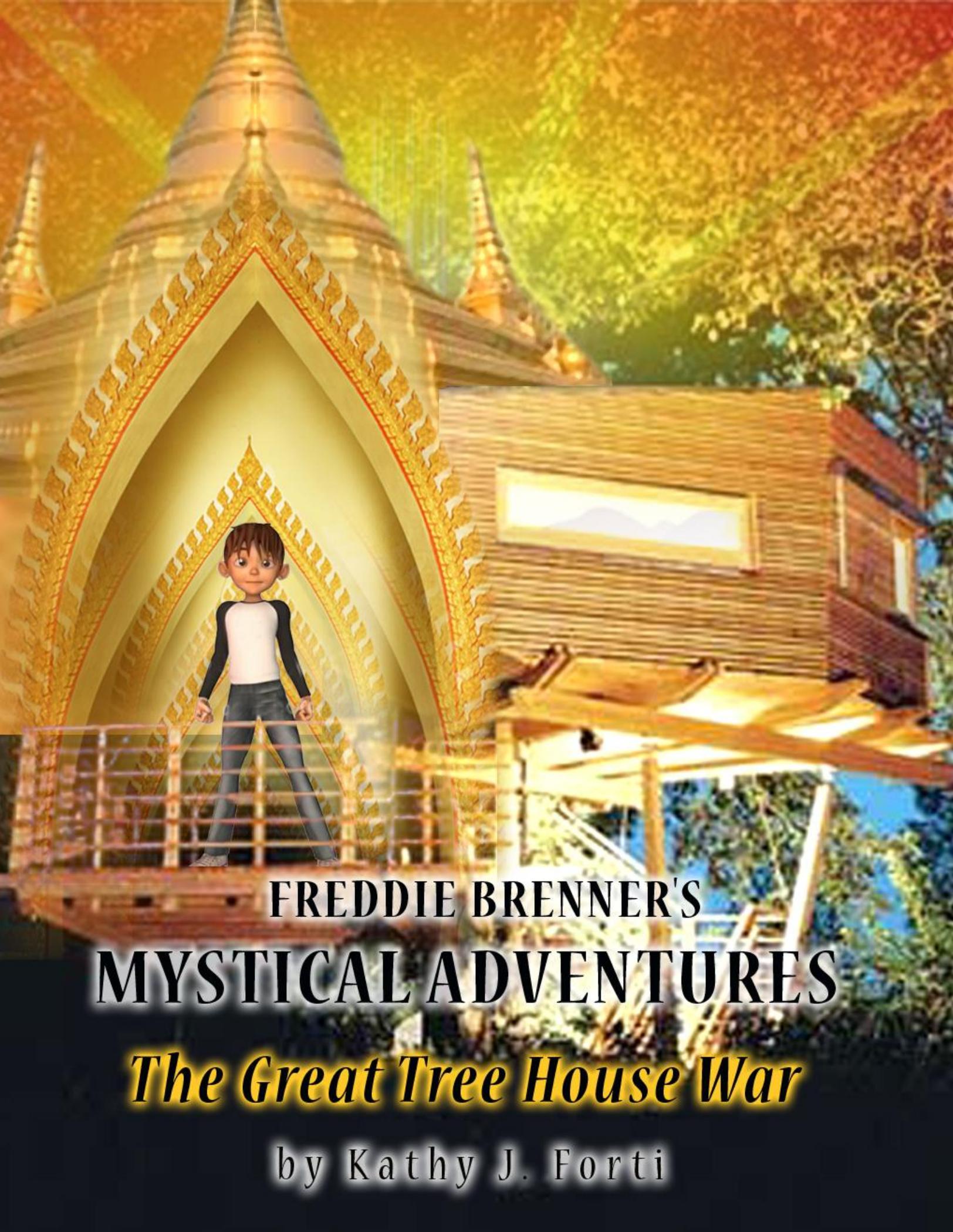
“Will you always be with me?” Freddie asked, already knowing it to be true.

“I’ll always be with you.” Daniel reassured him. “The universe is filled with wonderful things to learn. We’ve got more adventures ahead of us.”

Freddie felt good inside. He had learned that no mountain is too high to climb if you believe you can do it. And like a true Explorer Scout, paving new paths and making

new discoveries, Freddie Brenner would keep on climbing right to the top. After all, he had a Guide to help light the way.

THE END



**FREDDIE BRENNER'S
MYSTICAL ADVENTURES**

The Great Tree House War

by Kathy J. Forti

Chapter 4

The Great Tree House War

There's slithery things crawling around in my sleeping bag! Lots of them!" Kevin screamed. He tore frantically at the jammed zipper on his bedroll trying to escape.

"C'mon you guys! Help me out of here!" he yelled. His three friends were doubled over with laughter watching him struggle.

It had been a wild night. Freddie and his friends, Ernie, Kevin, and Crazy Willy had camped out in Freddie's tree house. No one had slept a wink. They were all having too much fun.

Ernie grabbed his Polaroid camera. "Smile, Kevin old boy!" he shouted over the laughter, popping off a flash. "I'm going to call this one 'Kevin Meets the Creature from the Depths'."

With one good yank, Kevin freed himself from the ripped sleeping bag and cautiously reached down into its dark depths. His hand settled on something cold and slimy.

"Ugghhh, gross!" he uttered, slowly drawing it out into the light to examine it. "Wet spaghetti! Real funny!" He threw it at his friends in disgust. They only hooted louder with laughter.

But even Kevin couldn't help smile as he watched the picture slowly develop. He had to admit, he did look pretty silly.

The inside of the tree house was a disaster area. Half eaten bags of chips, pretzels, and empty soda cans littered the tree house floor.

"I think I ate too much," Freddie belched, holding his stomach.

They had all pigged out more to keep awake than from being hungry. Although none of them would be the first to admit it, they were pretty much afraid to go to sleep. Something strange was going on in the house next door. No one lived in the house—at least no one was supposed to live there. The house had belonged to old Mrs. Brubaker who had died a little more than three months ago leaving it dark and empty. Everyone

had liked the old woman. She had been the Betty Crocker of Baxter Street. She was always baking something and then giving away recipe samples. No one ever passed up Mrs. Brubaker's house on Halloween. It was always the first stop. Her fresh chocolate cookies and brownies were out of this world.

But all that had changed since she had died. The house had stood silent since then—at least until tonight. Freddie had spotted the eerie light first. It moved slowly up the stairway and settled in the back bedroom. He could see strange shadows dancing on the walls as it moved. And then the others saw it, too. No one said a word as they watched in silence. Sometime in the night a lone hoot owl screeched a warning causing all four boys to jump at once.

“Well, one of us should probably go check it out,” Willy suggested with an air of false confidence. “I vote for Ernie.”

“No way!” Ernie shot back. “I’ve seen those movies where some guy goes down into some dark basement all alone, armed with some itty-bitty flashlight that suddenly goes dead. He may be stupid, but I’m not!”

No one else was up to volunteering either, so together they watched, trying to keep awake to see what would happen next. They didn't have long to wait. Ten minutes later the house suddenly went dark and mysteriously silent. The night dragged on as they waited for something else to happen, but it never did. Soon dawn came and the dark shadows of the night were only traces under the sleepy eyes of Freddie and his friends.

“What do you think it was?” Kevin asked for the hundredth time.

They had run out of possible answers. They were lost in their own tired thoughts when footsteps were heard climbing the tree house steps. Four sets of eyes stared at the door. A soft knock was heard and the door slowly creaked open.

Their friend Melissa poked her head in. Her friend Chrissy was right behind her. A chorus of relieved sighs could be heard all around. Melissa surveyed the total mess.

“You guys must have had some night!”

Without missing a beat she added, “But if you can drag yourself away from this garbage dump, there's something happening next door you'll want to see.”

“Yeah, we already saw it last night!” Crazy Willy moaned. “Looks like old Mrs. Brubaker came back for a ghostly visit. Maybe to make some devil's food cake!”

Melissa looked over at Chrissy and grinned. “Well, if that’s the case I can’t imagine why she brought so many bicycles with her.”

Freddie and his friends blinked in stunned surprise. Bicycles? They all moved at once, trying to be the first down the quick escape hatch to see for themselves. Parked right next door was the biggest moving van Freddie had ever seen. An army of movers were carrying in boxes and furniture. It sure looked like somebody had bought the old house. The front yard looked like a giant yard sale as they quickly began unloading the truck. Freddie and his friends silently moved in to check out the action.

Chrissy was the first to peek into a large open box. “Look at this!” she yelled over. “They’ve got all the top hits CDs!”

Ernie had discovered another box of treasure. “Wow! A Play Station 2 with just about every game known to man.”

“Sure looks like they have kids,” Freddie said surveying the evidence. He walked up the front steps, as he had thousands of times when old Mrs. Brubaker had lived there. Melissa was right behind him. The others—well the others were too busy to even notice. Freddie glanced towards Melissa who had that look in her eye. He’d seen that look too many times. It meant she was picking up something interesting.

“What is it?” he asked.

“They have seven kids. Four boys and three girls,” she said matter-of-factly. Freddie’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “Seven! Really? Are you sure?”

Melissa had that silly grin on her face. Freddie knew it was a dumb question to ask considering all he knew about Melissa’s unusual talents. She just knew these things. Melissa knew a lot of things before they actually happened. And a lot of times she knew exactly what people were thinking, too. Some people called it ‘ESP’ or ‘second sight’ but Melissa just called it her ‘special gift’. That ‘special gift’ had helped Freddie out a number of times in the past. She could be amazing at times. But she didn’t talk about it much--at least not to other people.

“I bet they have twins,” she said. “I keep seeing two pairs of the same faces.”

“Out of the way you kids!” a mover shouted. Two men carrying bed mattresses marched through the open door.

“Just bring them right upstairs,” a woman’s voice called down from the second floor. “They go in the back bedroom.”

Freddie perked up his ears. “That’s the same bedroom we saw the strange light in last night,” he whispered. “I wonder if she knows about it?”

“That light you saw--it was her,” Melissa said knowingly. “She spent the night waiting to meet the mover’s this morning and found the electricity hadn’t been turned on. That was probably her flashlight you saw.”

Freddie nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I figured all along,” he mumbled, edging his way into the entry hall.

Inside the living room a maze of boxes took up the entire room. Some were stacked so high you could barely see out the front window. Out in front, moving men were wheeling a string of bicycles towards the garage. It looked like a parade. Freddie could see that his friends were really having a field day scouting out all the neighbors’ stuff.

“Four boys?” he repeated. The idea of making new friends was exciting. “I wonder when they’re coming?”

But Melissa wasn’t listening to him. She had just heard a second female voice upstairs which was beginning to make her nervous.

“Freddie, I think we’d better go.”

“He sidestepped a box marked “DISHES” only to trip over a smaller box he hadn’t noticed. The box toppled over spilling little bundles of old letters onto the floor. They both dived for the letters at the same time, trying to scoop up the contents before anyone caught them.

“That one, too,” Melissa said, pointing to a small black book which had fallen to the side. Freddie picked it up. On the cover in gold letters was stamped the words “My Diary.” His eyes lit up, ever curious. He flicked it open to see the name “Carla James” written inside in fancy lettering.

“Better put it back,” Melissa suggested, glancing nervously around.

But he didn’t heed her advice. An unlocked diary was just too big a temptation. He quickly scanned the pages. His eyes darted over the passages written in bold handwriting. Beside him, Melissa was impatient to go.

“Listen to this,” he whispered getting her attention.

‘I saw him again today, but he didn’t know I was watching him. I don’t even know his name yet, but he is definitely so HOT. I think I’m going to like moving to this new place after all.’

Suddenly, Melissa was all ears. Freddie turned the pages chuckling to himself. “This sounds like soap opera stuff.”

“It sounds kind of romantic to me,” she said, quickly scanning the page. “Freddie, look at the date. It was written only a week ago.”

Freddie hadn’t noticed. “Listen, there’s more,” he went on, reading dramatically. ‘I dream of him every night. I can’t get him out of my mind. It was love at first sight. Soon, very soon, destiny will bring us together and he’ll know we were meant for each other.’

“Put that down!” a voice screamed behind them.

Freddie and Melissa whirled around to face the tear-filled eyes of a very pretty, but angry, blond-haired girl about their own age. She’d been so quiet, neither of them had heard her enter the room.

“That’s mine. You had no right reading it!” She grabbed it out of Freddie’s hands and threw a murderous look at Melissa.

“You’re Carla?” Freddie asked cautiously. He tried to cover a smile, but wasn’t very successful.

Melissa nudged him. “Freddie, I think we’d better be going now,” she urged.

“I bet you think it’s really funny? Don’t you?” the girl screeched at him like some wounded bird. “You have no idea what you’ve done.”

Freddie didn’t know what to say. It was only a silly diary. He couldn’t understand why she was so angry.

Melissa found the words for both of them. “I’m sure he doesn’t think its funny and neither do I. We’re sorry. C’mon Freddie. Let’s go.” She almost pushed him towards the door.

Freddie couldn't quite put his finger on it, but something about Carla bothered him. As they made their escape, Freddie heard her final parting words—"We'll just see how sorry you'll be!"

Before they even made it past the front steps, his younger brother Michael came racing around the house calling Freddie's name at the top of his lungs.

"What's wrong, Michael?"

Michael was trying to catch his breath. "You've got to stop them. They're wrecking the tree house!"

Freddie didn't even wait to ask who was wrecking the tree house. He ran to the backyard with Melissa close on his heels.

The Brenner's yard was a puzzling sight. Everyone was yelling at someone. There were all these strange kids in the tree house. One girl dangled from a tree branch, another boy was crawling on the roof, a dog stood snarling by the steps, and an odd assortment of very similar looking faces could be seen hanging out of every tree house window.

His friends were trying to stop the kids from throwing out everything in the tree house. Freddie looked up just in time to see his own sleeping bag being tossed out the window and land on the ground in a heap at his feet. He couldn't believe his eyes.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" he angrily demanded. He ducked as his tool chest hit the ground just missing him by inches. He stormed for the steps but a large German shepherd dog blocked his way. He growled at Freddie showing sharp fangs. Freddie took one cautious step backward and turned to his friends for some explanation.

"They think it's theirs now!" Ernie said, madder than ever.

Chrissy stomped her foot in annoyance and pointed. "And that girl over there won't call her mongrel dog off either. I'd like to show her a thing or two."

Kevin was quick to agree. "They keep saying that they bought the tree house when they bought Mrs. Brubaker's house." He threw up his arms in disgust. "They're all crazy!"

Melissa stepped forward. "That's ridiculous. There's simply been some mistake."

Up in the branches of the tree a voice shouted back. “There’s no mistake. This tree house belongs to us, fair and square, and it’s all legal, too!”

“Says who?” Crazy Willy shot back.

“It’s all down on paper,” the boy yelled back. “Our dad will show you when he gets home.”

Freddie didn’t know what the kid was talking about. “This is our tree house. We built it,” he declared loudly for all to hear. “We never signed any papers giving it to anybody.”

Two identical looking boys only laughed at them. Freddie couldn’t help but remember Melissa predicting earlier that the new family might have twins. One of those twins jumped down from his perch and approached their group.

“My dad just bought that house over there. According to the property map this here tree is on our property line. Get the picture, dumbo? That makes it ours and all of you are trespassing.”

Freddie was seething over the ‘dumbo’ remark. On top of it, his friends were now pushing him for an answer. An answer he didn’t have. There had never been any fences separating the two properties. Ever since Freddie could remember, he and his brother had always had the freedom of both yards. He had no idea if the tree in question actually sat on old Mrs. Brubaker’s side of the property or on the Brenner side. It had never seemed to matter before today.

“Is that true?” they were all asking at once.

Ernie already had ideas of his own. “Even if it is, we’ll just get ourselves a lawyer and sue their pants off.”

The new kids just snorted and laughed.

“Hey, Carla. Come on up and take a look at our new tree house,” a girl perched on a railing called down.

Freddie’s friends all turned at once to see who ‘Carla’ was. Inwardly Freddie groaned. He could just feel what was coming next.

Crazy Willy quickly sized her up. “Let’s take her hostage,” he whispered. “We could do it real easy.”

Carla eyes snapped with anger. “I’m glad your old tree house is now ours. It serves you right!”

“Grab her,” Willy urged. “What are we waiting for?”

Melissa frowned. “This is getting out of hand.”

“Shut up!” Carla snapped back. “You’re as bad as he is,” she said pointing to Freddie. She turned to her brothers and sisters. “I found these two snooping around our house looking to steal our things.”

This bit of news brought a nasty chorus of shouts from all the new kids.

“Why, you little liar!” Melissa shot back, taking a step towards her. Whether Carla raised a protective arm thinking Melissa was going to attack her, or whether she had every intention to strike Melissa herself, Freddie would never know. He reacted instantly, grabbing Carla’s hands and pulling them behind her back to stop her. Carla’s brothers and sisters took this as a clear declaration of war. In seconds, they were on the ground running to help avenge their sister’s would be attackers.

It all happened so fast that no one was really thinking clearly. Fists lashed out in every direction and soon Freddie’s backyard was the scene of 14 kids hitting, shoving, biting, pulling hair, and rolling all over the ground in open combat.

Freddie received a hard right hook that sent his head spinning. His nose was bleeding pretty badly. Blood ran down into his mouth, but he didn’t care. A few feet away he saw Chrissy with a fistful of someone’s hair in her hand. She was crying hysterically. Freddie was just regaining his balance from a punch when he saw a face appear in the tangle of fighters—a face he’d seen so many times before when he was in need of help. It was the face of his friend and angel guide, Daniel. Daniel always had a knack for showing up when Freddie was up to his ears in trouble—like now.

Daniel made his way through the tangled battleground of fighting kids. “This doesn’t look good,” he said, shaking his head at what he saw.

Freddie ducked as Carla’s clenched fist sailed right past his chin and clipped Melissa by the eye instead. He groaned. She was sure to have a good shiner before nightfall.

“They started it!” Freddie shot back.

“You’ve got to break it up,” Daniel urged.

“I can’t!” Freddie shouted. “It’s gone too far.”

Behind him he felt an arm grab him and swing him around. “Talking to yourself?” Carla’s twin brother jeered at him before wrestling him to the ground.

Freddie was sure it was Daniel who somehow alerted the two mothers to what was going on outside. Both of them came running out to the backyard at about the same time and quickly put a stop to the bloody battle. Although they parted ranks, tempers were still flying—and Freddie’s mom was furious.

“If something hadn’t made me look outside you’d probably be killing each other right now,” she said. “What in the world has gotten into you Freddie?”

He told his mom the whole story, except for the part about Carla’s diary. It helped cool her anger a bit. His mom knew how much the tree house meant to all of them, but she still didn’t like them fighting about it.

“Wait until your Dad gets home. He’ll take care of this matter.”

In the past, those words had always been enough to strike fear and dread into Freddie. It usually meant he was in big trouble. The kind of trouble which meant being grounded and no more allowance for the rest of one’s life. But this time was different. This time he hoped his dad would have answers for him regarding the tree house. He would just have to wait and see.

In the meantime, Freddie’s bathroom looked like the emergency room at the hospital. Bloodied towels and band-aids were all over the place. The injuries weren’t too bad. They would all survive. Melissa had a black eye as he suspected she would. But for the record, so did Carla. There were three bloodied noses, plus an assortment of cuts and bruises. No one had won on either side and the tree house issue was still up in the air. As far as they were all concerned—the war was still on.

No one wanted to go home. Freddie wasn’t sure if it was because they wanted to stick around and see what happened next or they were too scared to go home and face the music about why they looked the way they did.

Melissa surveyed herself in the mirror. Her long brown hair was a dirty, tangled mess and her swollen eye seemed to be getting even darker. She was not a pretty sight and he felt kind of bad. Carla’s punch had been meant for him. He handed her an ice pack and saw the fury written in her eyes.

“Ooohh, I’d just like to show that Carla a thing or two. Calling us thieves! The nerve of her. Just because of that dumb old diary of hers!”

Freddie recalled how only an hour earlier she had called the passages ‘romantic’. He shook his head, marveling at how quickly things could change. What a morning. While the others were still busy showing off their battle scars, he took Melissa aside.

“Daniel was there.”

Melissa nodded. “I know,” she whispered back. “And he didn’t look all that happy, did he?”

“Hey, you guys,” Ernie interrupted. “Are we going to plan our next move or what? I say we stake out our territory and take it back.”

“Yeah!” Michael agreed.

Kevin looked doubtful. “How? They’ve still got Godzilla Dog protecting the steps.”

Willy’s face lit up with an idea. “My mom’s got a steak in the fridge that will knock the socks off that mutt. He’ll be eating out of our hands in no time.”

Chrissy didn’t look convinced. “Just as long as it’s your hand he’ll be eating out of,” she said.

So the plan took form. They marched off to Willy’s house to raid the refrigerator, but Freddie and Melissa made no move to join them.

“Aren’t you two coming?” Ernie asked.

“Go on ahead,” Freddie answered. “Someone’s got to stay and keep an eye on things.”

“Right! Good idea.”

No sooner had the gang left than Freddie heard his dad’s car pull into the driveway. His office was close by and he often came home for lunch. Freddie raced out of the house to meet him. As he neared the car, his steps slowed. His dad slammed the car door. It didn’t look like he was having a very good day either.

Before anything could be said about the tree house, his mom came outside with Melissa. She saw the look on his dad’s face.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

His dad shook his head. “You can say that again. Nothing has gone right since I got to work this morning. And on top of it, some new guy, an old friend of the boss from some architectural firm in Chicago, started work today. Right off the boss hands over that big shopping plaza project for him to take over. The one I was supposed to get.”

His dad was clearly annoyed. “I’ve done all the research on it. This guy just waltzes in and takes over. It really burns me.”

Freddie knew exactly how his dad felt. Those kids next door had done the same thing to him with his tree house. His dad suddenly noticed the small bandage on Freddie’s forehead as well as Melissa’s darkening black eye.

“What in the world happened to you two?”

His mom took his dad’s arm. “That’s something we need to talk about. There was a fight with the new neighbors next door.” She nodded towards the Brubaker place.

“What new neighbors?”

Before she could answer, a car pulled up in the driveway of the Brubaker house. A man got out and headed for the door.

“Oh, no!” His dad tuned to his mom. “That’s him. That’s the new guy they hired who stole my project. Of all the rotten luck. He has to move next door to top it off.”

Melissa nudged Freddie. “I don’t think I want to stick around for this.

“Coward!” he whispered back. “You can’t leave now. It’s just starting to get interesting.”

“Freddie, your dad will probably explode when he hears about the tree house. I don’t think I want to be around when he does. I’ve heard enough shouting for one day and I still have to go home and explain this eye. If I don’t get in trouble for it, I’ll see you tomorrow.” And with that, she made her escape.

“What’s that big dog doing in our yard?” his dad asked.

“Uhh—that’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Freddie began.

Before anything else happened, Freddie told his dad the entire story. He left out, of course, the part about the diary like he had with his mom. He didn’t think they’d like the idea that he was snooping around reading other people’s private junk. He was smart enough to know he’d probably catch hell for that.

“And you say those kids said their father told them the tree house was theirs?”

Freddie nodded. His dad was getting more irritated. His face was turning that funny shade of red.

“First he steals my project and now he wants my kid’s tree house, too!”

His dad went directly to his study. From his desk he pulled out a large map showing the Brenner house and the property lines. He studied it carefully for a long time, saying nothing.

“Well?” Freddie asked, breaking the silence.

His dad looked at his mom. He then picked up his slide measure and walked out the back door. Freddie watched him measure from the side of the house to the tree. Then he went back and measured it all again. Not a word had been spoken the entire time. Freddie was beginning to have the feeling that something was terribly wrong. He knew it for sure when his dad finally faced him and looked him straight in the eye.

“Freddie, it’s not quite as bad as you think,” his dad began. “On the other hand, it’s not all that good either. According to the property lines and my measurements, that tree sits smack on the divider line between the two properties. Technically, one half of the tree belongs to our neighbors and the other half belongs to us. Anything that is on their half of the tree is legally theirs if they want to get really picky about it.”

“But that’s not fair!” Freddie blurted out. “We built it!”

His dad shook his head and turned to Freddie’s mom. “I can’t believe that guy would tell his kids to take over the tree house. There’s just no consideration for anyone anymore, is there?”

He thought about it for a moment. “I’m going to have a land surveyor come by and check it out first thing Monday morning just to make sure. I believe that tree was planted years after the initial property lines were established.”

His mom and dad went back into the house to eat lunch and talk it over. Seconds later, Crazy Willy came running up the driveway carrying a red, drippy brown bag in his hot little hands. The others were clustered around him.

“We got the meat. We just had to wait for my mom to get out of the kitchen before we could get at it.”

Freddie broke the news to his friends. His brother Michael tried to keep from bursting into tears when he heard.

“They won’t take our tree house away from us, will they Freddie? You won’t let them, will you?”

“No, Michael,” he said firmly. “That tree house is still half ours and I’m going to protect our half if it’s the last thing I do.”

New plans were made right then and there. “Can’t we just move the tree over to our side?” Michael asked innocently.

Kevin howled with laughter. “Yeah, right. Why not just cut loose the branches that hold up their half of the tree house?”

Everyone was talking at once with suggestions. Freddie had to shout for attention. “We have an advantage to our side of the property that they don’t have,” he announced. “The steps and the door are on our side. I say we claim them now!”

There was a chorus of approval all around. Crazy Willy whipped out the juicy red steak he’d snatched from home. He dangled it in clear sight of the dog who licked his lips eagerly. The German Shepherd edged closer to Willy. And Willy edged closer to the dog one cautious step at a time.

“Just like feeding candy to a baby,” Willy boasted. The dog lunged at the raw meat, practically tearing it out of Willy’s now trembling hand, and ran off with it behind the bushes. There was now a clear path to the tree house and their group seized it.

“Hey, get away from there!” someone shouted from the neighbor’s back porch.

“Try and stop us!” they shouted back.

A second later they did just that. All seven kids came tearing out of the house after them. Both sides reached the tree house steps about the same time—pushing and shoving to be the first one up. Freddie, Michael, Ernie, Kevin and Willy stood up to their army of seven. Melissa and Chrissy had already gone home. They were outnumbered, but they were determined. And then a very strange thing happened. Out of no where a huge swarm of biting insects flew right for them and surrounded the tree. The air was thick with flying bugs. You had to keep your mouth shut or they flew right into it. They were everywhere you looked. And they bit, too!

“Ouch! Did these suckers fly in from some man-eating jungle?!” Kevin screamed, swatting his neck and arms. Everyone ran for safety as the insects attacked. Not a soul could get close to that tree house without being bitten alive. Each side eyed the other side suspiciously as they moved away from the bothersome insects.

“Just you wait until those things fly away,” Carla’s older brother warned. “Then we’ll see who gets up there first and claims it.”

Freddie put his hands on his hips defiantly. “Then you’re going to have to stay up all night to stop us.”

“Oh, yeah?” sneered one girl.

“Yeah!” Freddie and his friends all shouted back.

The swarm of insects were still there an hour later. Three hours passed slowly and they still had made no move to fly off. It looked like they planned to stay awhile. It was the strangest thing they had ever seen. As evening came on, Freddie and the rest of them pitched a large tent in the backyard. It looked like it was going to be another all-night campout. The other side scurried to do the same, but had to settle for a large blanket thrown over a clothes line with the ends staked down.

Michael giggled behind the safety of the tent’s bug-proof screen. “If those bugs fly over to their blanket they’re going to be bitten really good. It would serve them right.”

“Some army!” Ernie snickered, looking over at the neighbor kids’ sad excuse for a tent.

Between the two backyards it looked like two opposing army camps waiting to do battle. Each had their own appointed soldier doing guard duty and taking turns as the night wore on. It was close to midnight when Kevin finally turned guard duty over to a sleepy Freddie. His eyelids could barely stay open after yesterday’s long night. To make matters worse, it was a warm and muggy summer night. Freddie would have given anything for the cool air-conditioned comfort of his own bedroom.

It was hot inside the tent with all his friends. He positioned himself outside the flap, his eyes straining to stay awake. Over in the enemy camp he could hear an occasional muffled complaint. Over by the tree house the insects had also set up camp for the night. He wished he could explain their strange appearance, but he couldn’t.

His mind wandered back to what Crazy Willy had been saying all night about the new neighbors. “Just bomb them out! You see them doing it on the news all the time. Just get rid of the jokers and you get rid of your problem. That’s how you take over other countries you don’t like.”

Someone else mentioned using weapons of mass destruction. In this case they were talking baseball bats and beebie guns. Talk like that bothered Freddie. He didn’t like the idea of using weapons. You were only asking for more trouble when you did. This was Baxter Street, not the Middle East. It was crazy talk leading to crazy things. Maybe that was why everyone called Willy “Crazy.”

He could hear Willy’s loud snoring inside the tent. The sound of it alone might drive anyone crazy enough to surrender. Maybe if he hooked up a microphone and aimed it at the neighbor’s camp it might do the trick. Call it sound torture. The thought made him laugh, but he was still worried.

He didn’t know what to do about all the fighting. All he knew was that he wanted the tree house back and he would have to come up with something really good to pull it off. He wondered what Daniel would do in such a situation. But Daniel was an angel. He didn’t have these kinds of earthly problems. Freddie looked around the dark shadowy backyard wondering where his angel guide was now.

“Daniel,” he whispered. “You out there somewhere?” But to Daniel, ‘somewhere’ could be almost anywhere in the universe. Half jokingly he muttered “Earth to Daniel---Come in Daniel.”

He was startled and surprised when a second later he saw Daniel standing over by the tree house motioning Freddie to join him. Freddie did a double-take as the swarming insects became frozen in time. They just hung there in the air motionless, leaving a clear open path to the tree house steps. Freddie glanced over at the neighbor’s dog and saw he was fast asleep. Without waiting for any further invitation, he tiptoed quietly over to where Daniel stood.

Freddie was especially glad to see Daniel. Daniel always seemed to know the best thing to do. He figured it came with the job. After all, he was an angel. Angels were supposed to know these things. Daniel had helped him out of so many jams that

Freddie had lost count. His familiar smile was reassuring right now and so was the sight of that old New York Yankee's baseball hat that Daniel liked to wear.

Without a sound, he gave Freddie the high sign to meet him up in the tree house. Passing through the motionless insects, Freddie scurried up the steps only to find Daniel already there. Freddie sure wished he could get around town like Daniel did.

"Maybe tonight you can," Daniel answered Freddie's thoughts. "I have some work to do tonight and I'd like you to join me."

It felt really good being back in the tree house again. Even though Freddie would have liked to reclaim his tree house right then and there, he knew Daniel probably had something else in mind. They had gone on so many amazing adventures together. Just thinking about where they might go tonight filled him with excitement.

"I'm ready," Freddie volunteered. "Let's go!"

Daniel grinned at Freddie's eagerness. "Remember how I once told you that it's easier for you to come with me when your body is sleeping?"

Freddie nodded. "But I'm not at all sleepy right now."

"Okay. Maybe I can help speed sleep along," Daniel offered. And with those words, Freddie felt a calm, gentle feeling spread over him. A few minutes later he was sound asleep on the tree house floor. He felt his spirit body gently float out of his sleeping physical body. It was as easy as ever. He had done it before and was getting used to it. Daniel called it an out-of-body experience.

"Get ready for something different," Daniel said. "We're going back in time together."

Cool! He'd never visited another time period before. Before he could ask what year and place they were going to, he felt himself being propelled faster and faster through a long dark tunnel. He'd gone through a tunnel something like it before. He wondered if this time it was a time tunnel.

"Something like that," Daniel explained, reading his thoughts. "It's sort of like black holes in space. Your Earth scientists don't fully understand them yet. These black holes are tunnels that lead to other dimensions in time and space—to other worlds both in the past and future. It's the secret passage of the universe that people pass through when

they're born and when they die--or when they're on learning adventures like this one here."

Out of the tunnel they flew into star-studded galactic space. The heavens twinkled with a million bright lights. Freddie became a little nervous when it looked like a few of those bright lights were headed right for them. One whizzed right past them and Freddie was amazed to see it was some sort of spacecraft. Seeing it was somewhat confusing. Hadn't Daniel said they were going back in time, not forward?

Daniel saw Freddie's confusion and quickly explained. "Believe it or not Freddie, we've actually gone back thousands and thousands of years in Earth time. Right now dinosaurs roam the Earth. But in other galaxies there are more advanced planets or star systems that have life on them. They've had thousands of years to work on their space programs, unlike Earth's which is still in its infancy stage."

Freddie wished he had Ernie's Polaroid camera with him. A picture of an alien spaceship would have blown his friends away.

Daniel suddenly had a thought. "That spaceship that just passed us just so happens to be going where we're going. C'mon, let's hop a ride."

This was getting even better than Freddie had hoped for. "We can actually do that?"

"Sure," Daniel said. "Tell your mind that you want to be inside that spacecraft. Really concentrate now. You can do it."

It sounded too easy to be true, but Freddie gave it a try. He pictured himself inside the spacecraft, piloting it. The next thing he knew he was standing next to Daniel on what looked like the officer's flight deck. They were actually inside! All around him he saw men monitoring control screens of colored lights and switches just like in the movies.

He didn't see any alien creatures with little green heads or weird bodies—or anything like that. These people looked pretty much like Earth people, yet taller. They all had an odd-looking gold band on their left ear—sort of like an earring. He watched and realized it was used as some type of communication device between everyone onboard. Kind of like Earth's version of headphones.

“They won’t be able to see or hear us,” Daniel informed him. “We’re here only to observe. Just remember that we’re not in any way allowed to interfere with anything that happens.”

Freddie was suddenly all ears. “Why? What’s going to happen?”

“You’ll see. These people live on a planet called Varga. It was once a very beautiful and happy planet, but then something happened to change it all.”

“What? What happened?” But his question quickly died on his lips, as a large screen monitor showed the ship was quickly approaching what Freddie assumed was the Planet Varga. A dozen other monitors snapped to attention and the captain’s voice echoed through the control room.

“Weapons in place. Lock coordinate lasers. Destroy target!”

The monitors showed a huge explosion going off on one side of the planet. Flames burst high into space. The crew shouted with victory at their direct hit.

The first officer frantically began pushing buttons and then started shouting, which certainly got everyone’s attention. “Captain, the sensors shows interference with our magnetic stability,” he shouted with rising panic. “The destructive wave is being reversed back toward us!”

Before the Captain could reply, a low rumbling rocked the ship. It became stronger with each passing second. The men on deck were shouting instructions and scrambling to protect their system.

Freddie could feel their fear. “Daniel, what’s happening?”

The ship felt like it was breaking up. Daniel, calm as ever, waved his hand and they were instantly surrounded in a protective bubble of light. Quicker than the blink of an eye, they were already speeding away from the spacecraft they had just been on. What followed was a burst of light that rocked the heavens. The spaceship was blown to smithereens and millions of particles were blasted into the cosmos. It was an awesome sight.

“Pretty scary stuff,” Daniel commented, seeing Freddie’s dumbstruck expression.

“I don’t understand. Why did they blow up Varga? And who blew them up?” He stopped, realizing he didn’t even know who ‘they’ were.

Daniel's face showed real concern. "Freddie, a lot of things get out of hand when people have differences and don't know how to talk and work them out. Maybe it would be easier to understand if we go back even further and see how this whole thing started."

Their protective bubble spun them backwards in time until it floated gently to a stop over the rooftops of what appeared to be a thriving fishing village. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining high in the sky and Freddie saw children playing on the beachfront. Others children were in the water riding what looked to be some kind of large jumping fish.

"Why, they're dolphins!" Freddie exclaimed, getting a better look. He watched a girl grab onto a dolphin's dorsal fin. Together they dove down into the clear blue waters.

Freddie would have given anything to be able to try that. His eyes searched the water waiting for the girl to come back to the surface. To his confusion and then alarm, she never did. He knew something was terribly wrong.

"Quick, Daniel," he pointed. "That girl needs our help. She's drowning!"

But Daniel didn't appear to be overly concerned. "Don't worry, Freddie. It's alright." But Freddie did worry.

He soon realized that others had not come back up either, yet new faces kept re-emerging at the surface all the time. Now he was even more confused. He couldn't figure out what in the world was going on. Some kids were going down with dolphins, but others were coming back up. Something mighty weird was going on down under the water's surface. And just as Freddie wondered how he might check it out, their protective bubble slowly began floating closer to the water. Gently it skimmed the clear blue surface, then dived right down into it.

Freddie gasped in both surprise, then awe. It was like being in a giant goldfish bowl. Beautiful schools of rainbow-colored fish swam past them. The water was so clear he could see all around him, enjoying the spectacular view of the coral reefs and white sandy bottom. Daniel pointed out a spot much deeper down where a brilliant light glowed. Dolphins carrying children on their backs were heading straight for the white light in the water.

"Can't this bubble go any faster?" Freddie asked impatiently. He wanted to get to that light.

Daniel laughed. “Okay. You asked for it.”

And with that Freddie was jerked backwards as the bubble took off at racing speeds. It zoomed into the light and through a short passageway that then opened into the biggest underground cavern Freddie had ever seen. A cavern with plenty of open air space to walk around and breath, just like on land—but it was under the ocean. It was too awesome for words.

The bright light from the cavern seemed to be coming from the rock walls where people were gathering what almost looked like frozen icicles. Freddie had no idea what they were. But they seemed important.

“They’re unusual and rare sea crystals,” Daniel explained. “There’s a wealth of crystals down here and these people use them to power machinery. They would pretty much be lost without them. These crystals are like your electricity on Earth, only much more powerful. The other people on this planet—the Air People, rely on these crystals to power their spacecraft.”

“Where are these Air People?”

“The people you see here are the Water People,” Daniel explained. “They can breathe underwater, so they gather all the sea crystals. Now the Air People live in the mountains. They’re smart and like to invent things, like flying machines. They can’t breathe underwater at all. In fact, most of them are scared to death of the water. So they get the crystals from the Water People who also have a way of communicating with the dolphins. It’s like a trade agreement. The Water People give the crystals to the Air People for their technology. In exchange, the Air People provide the Water People with all their unique inventions and protection.”

“So what started them fighting?” Freddie asked. He still couldn’t shake the memory of seeing both planet and ship blown up.

“We’re just in time to see,” Daniel said.

Their bubble carried them quickly back up to the surface and then floated towards the shore. They were just in time to see a group of boys and girls touch down on the beachfront in small tube-shaped space vehicles with glass bubble tops. Each boy and girl appeared to have their very own flying machine.

“Man, those things are great!” Freddie exclaimed wishing he had one just like it back on Earth.

“Listen,” Daniel said interrupting his thoughts. The bubble floated in close enough for them to hear what was being said by the Water and the Air children.

“Why won’t you give us a ride?” asked one Water girl to an Air boy.

“Because we don’t have time to play silly games with you. We have more important things to do,” the Air boy answered impatiently. “We’re off on a trip and we need some extra crystals. So hurry and get us some to take along.”

The Water children did not like what they had just heard. One of the taller Water boys spoke up. “We’re not going to give you any more crystals. Try and fly your damn flying machines then!”

His claim was backed up by another Water girl. “That’s right! Today all our people got together and we decided we don’t need your machinery or your air protection any more. We plan to start building our own vehicles. So who needs you any way!”

Freddie turned to Daniel. “Is that true?”

“No. It wasn’t true,” Daniel said shaking his head. “The war between all the people of this planet started with that one lie. The Air Children went back and told their parents and leaders that the Water people were planning a revolt against them and planned to deny them crystals. That meant the Air People would no longer have the power to get out of the mountains and fly like they loved to do. They would be trapped there forever with machinery that no longer had power. This scared them and made them very angry.

And of course the Water Children told their parents and leaders a similar untruth. They reported that the Air People were planning on seizing their crystal mines for themselves and were no longer going to give them their technology. That caused an immediate uproar.

Suspicion grew and anger spilled forth and soon no one was talking. Each thought the other side was out to destroy them, but it wasn’t true. It wasn’t long before fighting broke out. The Water People found a way to use the energy of their crystals to cause the mountains to tremble and wreck destruction on the Air People’s homeland. And the Air People used their technology to create weapons of mass destruction that

would foul the Water People's oceans and lakes and set off great blazing balls of fire throughout their homeland. It was a living nightmare for everyone."

Freddie's eyes grew big as he listened. It all sounded so ridiculous. "If only they would have talked to each other," he said shaking his head. "Then they could have cleared up the whole misunderstanding."

"Yes," Daniel agreed. "But, they didn't talk. And soon they were both misusing the power of the crystals, which was a very dangerous thing to do. The more they used it for destruction, the less they were able to control it. Soon the land was trembling with earthquakes all over the planet. There was no longer any safe place to go. The planet was dying from all the hate and fighting going on.

One day the Air People tried to escape and leave the planet with as many crystals as they could take with them. But in trying to prevent the Water People from stopping their spaceship, the power of the crystals blew them all up. That's what you saw. It was a hard lesson to learn."

"And the planet really did blow up?" Freddie asked.

"Yes, it did. And everywhere in the universe other planets shook and felt the great loss of their sister planet that had died."

Freddie looked around at the beautiful mountains and hills of the planet Varga. He suddenly thought of his own beautiful backyard and the new neighbor kids. He was beginning to understand why Daniel had taken him back in time to see what happened to the people of Varga. It had all started with some kids arguing and one thing leading to another. He never thought about how lies could be weapons of mass destruction. He wondered about Planet Earth with all the fighting going on. Could it someday be destroyed as well if people didn't work things out and make peace?

"I just can't figure it out," Freddie said. "Why did Carla lie and say we were trying to steal their stuff? I was only reading her diary."

Daniel had an odd little smile on his face. It was the kind of smile that usually meant he knew something but wasn't telling.

"Ask Melissa," Daniel said. "I think she knows and understands something about Carla that you don't."

Freddie wondered what in the world it could be. But, he'd think about that later. Right now he could only think about the future of his tree house.

Daniel felt Freddie's concern. "Freddie, we went back in time but we can also go forward as well. Remember that the future is flexible and is still being written. You can change it if you make up your mind to do it. But maybe you'd like to see what could happen if you continue to fight over the tree house."

Freddie certainly *did* want to know. And with that desire, he felt a whirlwind of time passing around him like someone had pushed a fast forward button on a giant life-like VCR. He was once again in his backyard standing in front of his tree and the tree house he had helped build. But something was terribly wrong. Branches were either missing or were cut off. Leaves were dried out, brown, and withered. Some kind of illness seemed to be spreading all over his tree like a fungus. Men were tearing the tree house down because it was unsafe to be in. And others were waiting with electric chain saws to cut his tree down.

His beautiful tree was nothing like Freddie had remembered it. Yet, the tree house still looked fairly new. He was shaken to realize that the future for his tree and tree house did not look good.

"Yes. Your tree died," Daniel said, confirming Freddie's worst suspicions. "It gave up the will to live and soon its dead, brittle branches cracked under the strain of holding up the tree house. The tree house became too dangerous to be in. Like the tree, it also had to come down."

"But why?" Freddie asked, not wanting to believe it. "That tree is healthier than ever. It won't die. I'll make sure of it!"

"Freddie, that tree will die in one year's time if things do not change. People don't understand, but trees can feel the good and bad happening all around them, like some people do. If you stop and think of all the places on Earth where war or fighting is going on, you'll find the land is slowly dying, crops are failing, and many times water becomes polluted or dried up. The land feels the unhappiness and unrest of the people living there and eventually the land becomes weak and sick itself. It wants to get away from the fighting people, but it can't. Sometimes the land causes earthquakes to shake

the people up to work together, but they don't always seem to hear the land's message of warning."

Freddie had never thought about it that way before. It did sort of make sense. He thought of all those places on Earth where the air was clean and the land was very beautiful. They seemed to be mostly in areas where not many people lived and where people respected the land, lived in peace and took care of it.

"So the tree will die if we keep fighting over it," Freddie said sadly.

"I'm afraid so," Daniel said quietly.

Freddie didn't want the tree to die or the tree house to be taken down. He would sure miss having them both to enjoy, as would all his friends.

"It's up to you, Freddie," Daniel said. "One person *can* make a very big difference in the world."

When he was with Daniel it seemed like he did an awful lot of thinking. Right now he felt tired. So tired that he closed his eyes for only a second, but when he opened them again he was back inside the tree house. He had gone back in the past and forward into the future all in such a short time. And, he hadn't liked what he saw one bit. He was glad to be back.

The first rays of dawn were peeking over the horizon when Freddie quietly descended the tree house steps. He hesitated for a second in front of the swarm of insects then passed right through them without being touched. Not a soul stirred. All was quiet as he walked past the two camps and proceeded down Baxter Street to Melissa's house.

Melissa lived at the end of the block and the window to her bedroom was conveniently right next to a strong oak tree that was perfect for climbing. Freddie hoisted himself half way up the tree, swung towards the window ledge, and tapped lightly on the glass. Through the open curtains he saw Melissa roll over in bed, her eyes fluttering half open as he tapped again. She looked up, her eyes wide with surprise, as she recognized the person sitting on her outside ledge. She bolted straight out of bed and flew to the window to open it.

"What are you doing here at this hour of the morning? Have you gone crazy?"

Freddie quickly climbed inside. "Maybe," he laughed. "After all, I've just been to Varga and back."

Melissa yawned. “Varga?”

Freddie quickly told her all about the trip he and Daniel had just taken. “Daniel told me you know something about Carla I need to know. So what is it?”

Melissa looked away as if she had been caught trying to hide something. She gently rubbed her swollen black eye. He had to admit—Carla had given her one hell of a shiner.

“That Carla just makes me so mad. She told everyone we were stealing because she’s jealous!”

Freddie sat down on the bed. “Jealous? Of what? You?” As soon as he said it, he realized it hadn’t been the smartest thing to ever come out of his mouth. Melissa shot him a look that seemed to say “I can’t believe you’re being so stupid!”

“Freddie, she’s jealous because she thinks I’m your girlfriend.” Melissa looked at him waiting for some response, but he gave none. “You know…”

His mouth dropped open in surprise. He didn’t know what to say.

“She thinks she’s in love with you, Freddie!” Melissa said spelling it out for him. “That was *you* she was writing about in her diary.”

He still couldn’t believe it. “That’s ridiculous! I don’t even know her!” Geez, would he ever be able to figure out girls?

“She saw you a few times when her family drove by to look at the house. You stuck out in her mind.” Melissa said, before adding, “Why—we’ll never know.”

Freddie frowned. “I don’t see anything unusual about that,” he said with slightly wounded pride.

Melissa couldn’t help but grin. “I didn’t mean it *that* way. Carla was pretty hurt when she saw you reading her diary and laughing at all those things she wrote about you. She wanted to hurt you like you hurt her. Your tree house was the best way to do it. If you’d fallen head over heels in love with her when you first met, this whole tree house mess probably could have been avoided. You got off on the wrong foot with the wrong person. Carla’s the family favorite. All her brothers and sisters do what she says.”

Freddie remembered all the geeky stuff Carla had written in her diary about him. His face went hot with embarrassment. It only made it worse knowing that Melissa probably knew what he was thinking right now. If she did, she was smart enough not to

say anything. Lucky for him, his thoughts turned to Daniel and an idea started forming. It was so simple. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He looked at his watch to see how much time he had.

"Meet me at 9:00 a.m. in my backyard," he said heading back out the window. "And don't be late."

Freddie shimmied back down the tree and ran for his own house. He really hoped his idea worked. If Daniel was right about people solving things by talking it out, Baxter Street was about to have its very first session of the Brenner Peace Talks.

Without making a sound, he quietly began bringing lawn chairs out of his garage and placing them in a circle in the backyard. The dog next door eyed him suspiciously. Although he didn't have a round table like King Arthur's Knights, the circle of chairs was just as good. He had read somewhere that everyone at the United Nations in New York City also sat in a circle. That way everyone felt equal.

Next, he got pen and paper and started writing invitations to each side. He jazzed the wording up a little to sound official and wrote "Your Honorable Presence is requested at The Peace Talks on Baxter Street at 9:00 a.m. in the Brenner Backyard." By the time he was finished, Freddie had four very special notices in his hand.

The first invitation he put on the nightstand next to his parents' bed where they were still sleeping. The second one he pinned to the flap of his friends' tent, and the third one to the makeshift tent of the neighbor kids. Luckily for him, the dog did not try and bite him.

When he was through, he tied a white handkerchief of peace onto a long stick and sat down to wait with the last invitation still in his hand. It wasn't long before people started waking up on that fine Saturday morning and finding the notes he had left.

"What is this mumbo jumbo?" Willy said as he read it. "What's the big idea, anyway?"

"You'll see," Freddie calmly reassured. "Just make sure you're all there."

The reaction over in the neighboring camp wasn't much different. "Is this some kind of dumb joke?" one boy shouted over.

"No joke," Freddie called back. "It's time we talked."

The other boy made a disgusting snorting sound. “Oh, yeah. Like we’re all really going to calmly talk. In your dreams!”

Freddie silently slipped away from the scene to take care of the final invitation. He acted on a last minute impulse and went to pick a small bouquet of flowers from his mother’s garden. His dad had told him once that when women were mad, flowers usually helped. He sure hoped he was right.

Carla had spent the night inside the house while her brothers slept outside on watch. The idea about calling on her didn’t thrill him, but he knew he had to face her sooner or later and get things straightened out. The thought made him very nervous. He prayed he wouldn’t say something really stupid and mess it all up. Maybe the flowers would make a good peace offering.

Freddie walked around to the front of the house away from staring eyes and knocked on Carla’s front door. Her mother answered.

She looked down at him. “Yes?”

“Mrs. James,” he began, stumbling over his first words. “My name is Freddie Brenner and I live next door.”

He saw her smile fade to one of wariness. She knew what had happened yesterday. He hurried on, not giving her too much time to think about it.

“I’m sorry about yesterday, Mrs. James. I guess it wasn’t much of a welcome to the neighborhood, but I’d like to change that. Will you and Mr. James join us this morning to talk about yesterday’s fighting?”

He handed her the invitation. “Please come,” he added, as she read what he’d written.

Her smile returned. He had obviously impressed her. “We’ll be there,” she said before adding, “I don’t suppose those flowers are for me now, are they?”

Freddie grinned. “No, ma’m. I don’t suppose they are. I’d like to see Carla if that’s possible.”

Carla’s reaction was not in the least bit encouraging. “Tell him to drop dead!” he overheard her tell her mother. “I never want to lay eyes on him again.”

There were muffled words between the two that he strained to overhear but couldn’t. He waited nervously on the doorstep. Maybe he should have brought her

snapdragons or cactus instead. She sure was a prickly one! But to his surprise, a few moments later Carla was face-to-face with him at the front door.

“My mother said I had to see you,” she said as cool as an Ice Princess. “It wasn’t my idea at all.”

“I brought you these,” he said offering her the flowers, “and also to say I’m really sorry about reading your diary and everything else that happened yesterday. I’d like for us to try to be friends, Carla.”

She sniffed at him suspiciously, not yet buying it. “Why should I believe anything you say? You’re probably just saying whatever you think I want to hear just to get your old tree house back. Well, it won’t work!”

She wasn’t going to make it any easier for him. What did she want from him anyway—blood? She had gotten that yesterday. Maybe in ten years he’d be experienced at this sort of thing, but right now he was trying hard to fight the urge to shove the flowers down her throat. Give me a break, he silently prayed.

“Well I want it to work,” he said truthfully. “It’s true that the tree house *is* important to me and my friends. But what I really wanted to say was that I understand how you feel and you were right to be angry with me. If I caught someone snooping through my private stuff I’d be pretty pissed as well.”

“I AM NOT ANGRY!” she said loudly and defensively.

Freddie threw caution to the winds and ventured into even shakier territory. He was sure glad Melissa or his friends weren’t there to witness it.

“Carla, I shouldn’t have laughed at what you wrote. That guy you wrote about must be pretty lucky to have you feel that way about him. I guess I don’t understand those things. I’ve never felt that way about anyone.”

If any of the guys had heard him say this stuff he would have died a thousand deaths. He didn’t know where this stuff out of his mouth was coming from, but he had the feeling Daniel was helping him say the right things. Girl things.

It appeared to be working. Carla’s eyes softened somewhat at hearing his words. He plowed ahead taking yet another chance. “What do you say we try and be friends?”

He sheepishly handed her the flowers. She hesitated for what seemed an eternity before finally accepting them. She was holding fast to her pride.

“Well, maybe...” she said.

“Good,” he smiled with quick relief. “I sure could use your help.”

No sooner had Freddie taken his leave from the now smiling Carla, then he spied Melissa coming up his front walk. One look at her grinning face and a quick roll of her eyes told him immediately that she knew exactly what he had just said and done. It was impossible to hide anything from Melissa.

“Oooh! Flowers, too!” she cooed, raising one eyebrow. “Does this mean your becoming romantic, Freddie Brenner?”

“Give me a break,” he said. “A guy’s got to do what a guy’s got to do.”

At 9:00 a.m. the Brenner’s backyard was filled with people. Everyone had showed up, mostly out of curiosity than anything else. Some had already taken seats waiting for the show to begin—or quite possibly ringside seats for the fight to begin. The grown-ups were still standing. Freddie’s mom was talking with Mrs. James and his dad was locked into what looked like a serious conversation with Mr. James. Freddie was about to call for order when he overheard Mr. James tell his father....

“You know, Ted, last evening I was looking through the notes and plans on that new shopping plaza project Carmichael asked me to take on. I saw that you had already put a lot of work into it before I came. Your ideas are really sound ones,” he said. “It just didn’t seem right for me to step in and take over after all the preliminary work you’ve done. I called Carmichael last night and asked him if he would give me a shot at the Glenview Office Park project instead.”

Freddie’s dad looked very surprised, even stunned, at what Mr. James was proposing.

“Thanks, Bill. That was really considerate of you.”

Mr. James smiled. “Well, if we’re going to be neighbors, we’d best start off on the right foot.” They both laughed. Then his dad added, “Now let’s hope our kids can be as sensible.”

Mr. James’ expression was one of puzzlement. “Frankly Ted, I can’t say I rightly know what all this commotion is all about.”

Freddie heard that last statement and he was determined to change all that. He quickly shouted for everyone’s attention. Everyone seemed to be present. Ernie, Kevin, Michael, Chrissy and Crazy Willy all sat in one group, their arms clasped across their chests waiting.

The James’ kids all took seats together on the other half of the circle. They scowled at Freddie’s friends who in turn scowled back. When Melissa sat down in the empty seat next to Freddie, Carla glared at her, got up, and claimed the seat on Freddie’s other side. He wondered what he had gotten himself into and then decided he didn’t even want to think about that right now.

He cleared his throat to speak, pausing as he saw the last empty chair in the circle being taken. Daniel had decided to join them. He heard Melissa’s soft gasp of surprise next to him, and knew she had seen him, too. Daniel winked at both of them and motioned Freddie to go on. No one else seemed to have noticed Daniel’s arrival, except for the James’ big dog, Jake.

Jake went straight for Daniel’s chair, nuzzling it oddly then climbed up on to it. The dog who yesterday had been so vicious was now happily sitting on Daniel’s lap purring like a kitten. Daniel clearly had his arms full. Freddie controlled an impulse to laugh, but instead turned serious for the business at hand.

“As you know,” he began. “We’re here to talk about the future of the tree house. My friends and I built the tree house believing that it was on our property. Now our neighbors, the James’, say it belongs to them and we no longer have any right to it because it sits on their land. The question is who does it really belong to?”

Mr. James frowned as he listened. There was mumbling all around. Freddie pulled out his dad’s property map for display. “The line on this here map shows that the tree sits right smack on the dividing line of both properties.”

Carla's brother jumped up. "My dad says that tree house is all ours. So what are you talking about?"

Mr. James looked dumbfounded. "Whooaa! Hold on a minute, Dennis. I said no such thing. Where did you ever get such an idea?"

"But you did, Dad," Dennis protested. "Remember when we asked you if what was on our property was all ours and you said it was? Then we asked you where our property ended and you said after the tree? Remember? Remember?"

Mr. James looked embarrassed as everyone stared at him waiting for an answer. "Kids, those boys and girls built this tree house. You can't expect to just take it away from them."

"Why not?" the boy named Stevie asked.

Mr. James looked at him sternly. "Because I didn't raise you to be that way. I didn't know all this ruckus was about who owned the tree house. And, anyway, the Brenner boy is right. The tree *does* sit on both properties. My initial calculations were before I looked over the property map."

Freddie saw Chrissy, Willy, and Ernie all smile one of those smug little victory smiles back at the James' kids. Dennis James saw it and didn't like it one bit. His face turned an angry red.

Carla's younger sister jumped to her feet. "But how can we use our part of the tree if their tree house is taking up our space in the tree? That half of the tree house should be ours. Shouldn't it, Dad?"

Mr. James scratched his head and exchanged looks with Freddie's dad. He was clearly caught in the middle. "Well, technically you have a point there Becky, but..." Everyone started talking at once.

"Freddie," Daniel called out over the noise of the others. "If your neighbors lose what they believe is rightfully theirs, there will never be peace. You've got to make it so everyone comes out a winner. It's not easy, but it's not impossible. Let's see what kind of peace negotiator you can be. Try and think about what it would take for both sides to feel like they've won."

And in a flash, an idea *did* come to him.

“Quiet everyone, please!” he shouted. “I think I may have a solution.” The circle became unusually quiet as everyone waited to hear what it was.

“I’d like to first talk it over with my friends here if you’ll excuse us for just a minute.”

He gathered his friends around in a team huddle, talking in hushed whispers while the others waited in suspense.

“Not bad,” Ernie said after hearing Freddie’s plan. “It might work.”

Crazy Willy only snorted. “What’s this neighborhood turning into--Tree House City!”

“Shut up and vote!” Chrissy barked back at him.

“Alright, alright. I’m in,” he said as they took the final count.

The James’ were all fidgeting in their seats impatiently. You could tell they were anxious to get this thing over with and reclaim the tree house for their own. Only Daniel, with a king-size Jake licking his face, appeared to be calm.

“In fairness,” Freddie began, resuming his leadership position, “that side of the tree *is* yours. Now, we could remove that side of our tree house, but it would only weaken the rest of the structure and destroy what we’ve already put a lot of hard work into. We don’t want that to happen. We could put up a wall between both sides of the tree house, but that would mean a lot of senseless rebuilding with less room. Instead, we propose to keep the tree house exactly the way it is.”

He paused, watching the confused faces of the other side before going on. “In order to do this, we would like to help build you your very own tree house in the tree right next to ours.”

“And build a connecting bridge,” Melissa added, surprising even Freddie who hadn’t thought of it. It was a great idea and was immediately seconded by both Kevin and Ernie. Even Freddie’s dad and Mr. James smiled their approval.

Michael, who had been silent up until then, suddenly came to life. His face beamed with excitement. “Oh boy--a bridge! Yeah, that’ll be really cool!”

While her brothers and sisters thought it over, Carla got to her feet and offered an opinion. “I think it’s a wonderful idea and we’ll both get what we want. In fact, we’ll build an even better second tree house.”

Crazy Willy looked at her like she might be pushing the idea, but thankfully didn't say anything. All Carla's brothers and sisters huddled together and quickly discussed it. They agreed it was a pretty fair solution and immediately ran to check out the prospects of the other tree.

Freddie breathed a sigh of relief. It was the best of all possible solutions. He loved to build things and even though he knew it would be a lot of hard work all over again, it would be a lot of fun for everyone, too. After all, the building of the first tree house had turned out that way.

Figuring out how to put a bridge between the two tree houses excited him. His dad and Mr. James were already suggesting ideas. Once again there was new excitement and laughter in the Brenner backyard. They were going to start building again. Bigger and better this time. No more wars and or battles. Everyone seemed pleased and each side had come out a winner.

It would probably take forever to get all their names straight, but Freddie quickly learned from one of the twins named Tim that the James' had a large above ground swimming pool that they hadn't set up yet. It was proposed by Dennis and Carla to set the pool up under the connecting ramp between the two tree houses so they could all jump off into the water below. Everyone thought it was a great idea. Freddie and his friends were getting a new swimming pool thrown into the bargain. Not a bad deal after all.

Although Carla and Melissa might take awhile to get over the black eyes they'd given each other, Freddie was confident that sooner or later they'd work it all out. He looked over at his tree house just in time to see Daniel flash him the high sign. The dog named Jake still sat next to him.

"The two tree houses was a brilliant idea, Freddie. A real win/win for everyone," he said giving Jake a playful pat on the head. "Looks like everything's under control here. Be seeing you." And with that Daniel was gone. Freddie smiled, watching Jake run in circles trying to find him, before letting out a low whine.

At the same time, the swarm of biting insects hovering around the entrance to the tree house rose high into the sky and disappeared altogether. Everything was at last getting back to normal. The tree house was alive with kids. Melissa was talking paint

colors with Dennis James. Some of the others were taking stock of leftover lumber in the Brenner's work shed. Freddie's mom and dad invited Mr. and Mrs. James over for coffee and so all in all Freddie figured the peace talks had been a huge success.

"You know," Carla said, interrupting Freddie's thoughts. "That guy was right! Building a second tree house *was* a brilliant idea. And I'm glad you thought of it."

"What guy?" Freddie asked cautiously.

"You know. The one in the New York Yankees baseball cap." She looked around to point him out, then shrugged. "Well, I guess he already left. Who was he, anyway?"

It was Freddie's turn to be totally surprised. Carla could also see Daniel—amazing!

Freddie smiled. "That's Daniel. He comes and goes a lot. He's a pretty special kind of guy."

"He's a friend of yours?"

Freddie nodded thoughtfully. "Oh, yeah. I'd say he's my best friend."

THE END



FREDDIE BRENNER'S
MYSTICAL ADVENTURES
Looking for a Rainbow



by Kathy J. Forti

Chapter 5

Looking for a Rainbow

It was love at first sight. Freddie Brenner pressed his face against the pet store window, as he had every day for the past few weeks. He watched longingly as the little black puppy romped around on its shredded bed of paper.

His mind went back to the first time he had wandered into the pet shop. The very day the puppy had arrived. The owner was trying to put him in his cage and his little body squirmed every which way to break free.

“Can I hold him?” Freddie had spoken up, wanting to save the little dog. Freddie hated to see animals caged up. They always looked so sad.

“Sure,” the owner said. “Better hold onto him. This one has a mind of his own.”

From the moment Freddie took him into his arms it was like two old friends being reunited after a long separation. The little dog immediately wrapped its tiny paws around Freddie’s neck and started slobbering his face with grateful kisses. After that, the pet storeowner had one hell of a time separating the two of them.

Freddie Brenner was determined to make that little dog his no matter what. “Just one more day, fella, and you’ll be all mine,” he whispered against the glass window. The watery, black eyes seemed to understand as the dog scratched against the window trying to reach him.

“Got to go now or I’ll be late for school. But come tomorrow, I’ll get you out of this here prison and you’ll be a free dog at last. Hang in there little buddy.”

Freddie glanced at his watch. It was hard tearing himself away from the sight of that wet little nose pressed up against the glass. How he wanted that dog. It had been all he could talk about for the last few weeks. Everyone knew how he’d been saving to buy the little animal. It got to be a joke with his friends that instead of saying, “I’ll meet you at the corner of Elm and Waverly,” they’d say instead “I’ll meet you by Freddie’s dog.”

Freddie laughed when he thought about it. Yes, everyone sure knew how he wanted this dog. But buying a dog from a pet store these days wasn’t cheap. It would take all of Freddie’s paper route savings and, of course, the money his dad had promised

to chip in if he made the grade on his report card. And today was that day. Report cards would be passed out this afternoon at the end of last period.

He knew he was just going to have to wait until then to find out whether he had come through with flying colors. History class had been a real killer for him. He was terrible at memorizing facts and dates. His other grades, like math and science, didn't worry him a bit. He could ace those with his eyes closed. All in all he had to admit he was a pretty good student. Maybe he'd even be on the honor roll if he wasn't so lousy in the history department.

Freddie had really been trying his best all semester, but as far as he was concerned, who cared when a bunch of crazy Americans threw tea into the Boston Harbor. He was going to be an architect when he grew up—not some geek historian.

His dad had promised to give him reward money to buy the puppy if he passed history. That had been enough to make Freddie study just a little bit harder. Lately, his brother Michael had been studying like a fiend. If his report card was also good, Michael would be able to get new tropical fish for his tank. Michael was into fish. Freddie was obviously into dogs. After all, you couldn't teach fish new tricks and who ever heard of taking your fish for a walk? Besides, half of Michael's fish usually landed up in the toilet doing the dead man's float. It was pretty disgusting.

Dogs seemed to be a better investment. Freddie knew he'd have his dog to keep him company for a long time to come. And so every night he'd watch his brother lock himself in his room, religiously doing his homework and making Freddie feel just a little bit guilty if he spent any less time hitting his own books.

If only his parents had been out of town the night of Parent/Teacher Conference at school. But as luck would have it, they hadn't been and now he had all this pressure on him to be a perfect student in everything. He figured his teacher must have laid it on real thick to his parents. She'd probably told them their son was being lazy or something. Or that he wasn't "applying" himself. Teachers liked to use that term—"He's not applying himself." Well, it probably looked that way to her, especially since all his other grades proved he was no dummy.

His dad had come home that night and laid down the law. Freddie had been grounded and couldn't go out with his friends until he started showing improvement in

history. He wasn't about to have his social life take a big hit, so he hit the books really hard and "applied himself". His next test showed a C+ instead of a D. It wasn't an earth shattering grade by any means but his dad was at least convinced he was trying. After that he was no longer grounded.

But he knew he wasn't out of hot water just yet. Last week he'd taken the history midterm and it had been the mother of all tests. He wasn't sure how he had done, but his report card today would spell it out for him. During most of the test, he had found himself thinking about that little black dog. As a result, his mind kept going blank when it came to test answers. That was not a good sign. For all he knew, he might have written down the answer that the Whig Party was a convention of hairdressers. Freddie tried not to think about that right now. He was probably worrying over nothing. There was no way he could have failed. The dog would be his. He was sure of it.

"Hey, Freddie," Willy called out ducking into the classroom just as first bell went off. "When you going to get that dog of yours?"

Freddie grinned confidently as he shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on a coat room hook. "I figure tomorrow," he said taking his seat. "My dad will cough up the money he promised just as soon as he sees how brilliantly I did on my report card."

Willy was just about to ask him something else when Melissa got up in front of the class trying to get everyone's attention. David Toohey, was standing guard by the classroom door to let them know when Miss Mark, their teacher, was coming.

"SShhh! Quiet everyone!" Melissa said loudly. "We don't have much time before she gets here. So far we've collected \$34.00 for Miss Mark's birthday present. As you know, the day after tomorrow is her birthday and we need to raise \$6.00 more if we're going to be able to buy that desk set for her. David's father can get us a really nice one through his place of work, and cheaper, too! So dig down deep in your pockets and give up that extra candy bar for lunch. Come on now. We can do it! We're going to make this the best surprise she's ever had."

Everyone liked Miss Mark. She could be tough at times, but she was pretty fair. For the past week they'd been planning her surprise birthday party, cake and all. It was sure to guarantee a no homework day.

"Quick, she's coming!" David called out.

Melissa looked quickly towards the door. “Everyone who can—please remember to give your money to David before the end of today so his father can get us that desk set. Don’t forget.”

With that, Melissa scrambled to her seat, as did David, just as Miss Mark walked through the door.

That particular school day seemed like it would never end for Freddie. The suspense of waiting for his report card was slowly driving him crazy. In his mind he was already designing and building a dog house for his pup.

At last the moment he had been waiting for and dreading at the same time had finally arrived. All around the room there was a combined mixture of terror, confidence, excitement and dread as Miss Mark produced the report cards from her briefcase and began passing them out one by one.

As she walked down the aisles, depositing the correct one on each person’s desk, her words were encouraging.

“Many of you have done extremely well this term. I’ve seen lots of improvement and I’m proud of every one of you. Some of you still need to work a little harder before the year is out and I know you will. If you have any questions regarding your grades or think I haven’t been fair—or that I’ve made some terrible error in grading, I will be happy to discuss it with you after class.”

She plopped Freddie’s card down on his desk and moved on. He just stared at it.

“Thank God!” came a relieved sigh from Ernie behind him. “She actually took pity on me and gave me a B in English. My mom is going to do back flips when she sees this.”

Freddie quickly opened his own, glancing down the column to see that he’d gotten his usual A in Math and B’s and B+s in his other subjects. Then his stomach did a complete lurch. There in letters that seemed to jump off the page was written---History D+.

He immediately felt sick inside. He hadn’t completely failed the course, but he might just as well have. Anything that even resembled a “D” in the Brenner house was like the kiss of death. Maybe if she’d given him a C- it wouldn’t look so bad, but a D+? Damn, it had to be a mistake!

He felt Ernie leaning over his shoulder to see what Freddie had gotten.

“D-day, huh?” Ernie said under his breath seeing the history mark. “You think your dad will still give you the money to buy your dog?”

The last bell of the day sounded and no one wasted time lingering. Ernie only stayed long enough to hear Freddie say, “Well, if he doesn’t I’ll find another way to get it. You can bet on that.”

He still felt like he’d been hit over the head with a baseball bat. He felt stunned, still sitting there as the class emptied out. He wasn’t sure what to think or what to do. He couldn’t bear the thought of how disappointed his parents would be with him. Maybe they would even be mad at him for not trying harder. He was sure to be “grounded” again. But worst of all, there was no way in heaven his dad would give him the extra money he needed to buy his dog. His dad always stood by his word. It was highly unlikely Freddie could strike some kind of deal. Even the chance of getting an advance on his next year’s allowance was out of the question. His dad’s answer would be “no way.”

Freddie got up from his desk and headed over to Miss Mark who was gathering her things to leave. Maybe he could strike a last minute deal with her instead. She looked up as he approached and before he could even start to lay out his case, she headed him off. “Freddie, I’m sorry I had to give you such a low grade. You’re a good student but your mid-term history score was just not high enough to bring up your grade average. Your essay answers sounded like you’d just been beamed down from another planet and had never heard of the American Revolution. Your mind seems to be somewhere else when it comes to history.”

Freddie latched on to that excuse. “You’re right. My mind wasn’t concentrating that day. But I knew the answers. I really did study hard. If I could take a make-up test I just know I’d do a lot better. Please give me another chance.”

Miss Mark glanced toward the door where another teacher was waiting for her. “I’m sorry, Freddie. The grade stays the same,” she said firmly. “If you want, I’ll get you some extra help—a tutor perhaps. But you’re really going to have to work a lot harder.”

She glanced towards the door again where the other teacher was signaling her to hurry. "I've got to go now, Freddie. We can talk about this again tomorrow."

Freddie cursed under his breath as she hurried from the room. How could she do this to him? He was half tempted to demand the money back that he'd chipped in for her birthday present.

Feeling defeated, he walked over to the coat room and reached for his jacket hanging on the hook where he'd left it. As he did, his foot stepped on something on the floor. Freddie bent down to pick it up and discovered it was a bulky white envelope with a rubber band wound tightly around it. His curiosity got the better of him. He unwrapped it and looked inside. It was filled with one dollar bills and some loose change. Counting it out, it came to exactly \$41.67.

"That jerk David!" he hissed, realizing where the money had come from. "We entrust him with this much money and he goes and leaves it lying on the floor."

Freddie shook his head. It was the money the class had collected for Miss Mark's birthday present. David Toohey had been responsible for it, but had dropped it in his hurry to catch the school bus. It was too late to go after him. The bus always left on time.

Freddie stuffed the money back in the envelope wondering what to do about it. He didn't want to be responsible for carrying all that money around and he couldn't just leave it on the floor either. There was no telling what would happen to it. He smiled. He sure wouldn't mind having that much money for himself right now. It would cover the extra cost to buy his dog. But he knew it didn't belong to him. And it wasn't like finding money on the street. This time he knew who it belonged to.

Instead, he went back to his desk and shoved it behind his books where it would be safe until tomorrow when he'd be able to give it back to David. In the mood Freddie was in, he thought it would serve the kid right for his carelessness if he let him sweat out the night wondering where he'd lost it.

Freddie headed toward the door, stopped and retraced his steps back to his desk. He grabbed his history book. He didn't want to add fuel to the fire by not taking it home with him. Things would be bad enough that night once they saw his grade.

When he got home his brother Michael was waving around his report card in the air and reciting out loud all the strange-named fish he was planning to buy.

“I saw this really neat Yellow-Tailed Damsel, but I can’t make up my mind if I want him or this really weird looking Lion Fish. What do you think, Freddie?”

“Go shove it!” Freddie muttered. “I don’t think. Ask my teacher.”

Michael gave him a weird look. Freddie turned, hunching his shoulders like a monster, and gave him a leering look right back. “I’ve been beamed down from another planet and don’t know Earth history yet. My brain cells need a master transfusion...”

Michael only stared at him. “Have you gone crazy or something?”

He ran out of the room shouting. “Mom, Freddie’s.....”

Freddie darted up the stairs to his room and shut the door. His mother was just the person he wanted to avoid right now. He would try to put off the inevitable just a little while longer. His dad would be home soon. Better to take them both on at once and get it over with.

“Freddie?” his mom called up from downstairs.

He pretended not to hear her by switching on his stereo.

Michael waltzed into the room. “Mom’s on her way up,” he announced over the music.

“Terrific!” he mumbled. He turned to his brother with a sudden thought. “Hey, Michael. You got any extra money I can borrow?”

“Nope!” Michael stated smugly. “All my money is going to buy new fish.”

Freddie’s mom walked into the room just then. Her face was smiling and happy and there was a lightness in her step. She’d obviously had a good day. Too bad he’d soon ruin it for her.

“Well, let’s see your report card,” she said all excited. “Michael’s was terrific! Dad’s going to be really proud of him---of both of you, I’m sure.”

Freddie wasn’t sure of that at all. He silently handed over his report card.

“Freddie, this is very good!” she said reading off each mark. Her face suddenly fell. She didn’t say a word. She looked up at him. It seemed an eternity.

“Michael, go downstairs and set the table for dinner,” she quietly instructed.

Michael’s eyes lit up guessing what was up. “Freddie got a bad grade, didn’t he? Oh, God, Freddie. I’d sure hate to be in your shoes when dad gets home!”

His mother was becoming impatient. “Michael, do as I told you and go downstairs---now!”

Michael hesitated. “And miss all the yelling?”

“Michael, there is not going to be any yelling, but there will be if you don’t do as I’ve told you. Now get going!”

Freddie was certainly glad to hear there wasn’t going to be any yelling. He sure hoped she was speaking for his dad as well.

“Okay, Freddie. What happened? I thought you were doing better than this in history.”

“I tried Mom. I really did.”

He tried some fast explaining, but his mom wasn’t buying it. When his dad got home that night he tried again. But as luck would have it, he’d had a really bad day at the office and coming home to hear Freddie’s news made the situation worse. Oddly, his dad didn’t yell and he didn’t scream. He just stared at Freddie as if his son had just put a knife in his chest and it was killing him. It was worse than yelling. The silent guilt trip could be even more deadly. It made him feel like he’d let his dad down.

Michael immediately stepped into the favorite son slot. He even got a second serving of fudge cake for dessert. He wanted to shout—but what about all my other good grades? But somehow that one D+ had made all the rest meaningless.

His father sent him up to his room after dinner to study, what else? The truth was that he was glad to escape. Freddie just sat there for hours thinking about that little black puppy quietly waiting for him to rescue him. Sadly, he knew the dog would have to wait a little bit longer. Maybe if he called up his Aunt Margo, who loved animals, she’d understand and lend him the money for his dog. It was an encouraging thought, but then he remembered his Aunt Margo might be out of town on business. He’d have to call her.

It was a sleepless night for Freddie. He tossed and turned continuously. In the morning he felt terrible. His head ached and his throat was sore. He wasn’t running a fever or anything, but his mom made him stay home from school anyway.

The house was awfully quiet with his dad at work, his brother at school, and his mom out running errands or whatever. Freddie thought it was as good a time as any to call his Aunt Margo at work and tell her about the dog situation.

“She’s in Los Angeles for the week and won’t be back until next Thursday,” her secretary informed him. “Would you like to leave a message?”

“No. I guess not,” he said, clearly disappointed.

For the rest of the day he moped around the house, watching TV, listening to CDs, watching Michael’s fish swaying their little tails all over the tank. He was bored to tears. His headache and sore throat had miraculously disappeared not long after his mom had decided he could stay home from school. With nothing exciting to do, he would almost prefer being in school right now. By the time school let out for the day, he began wondering why none of his friends had called wanting to find out why he hadn’t been at school. His friends were always calling him about something.

When 4:00 p.m. rolled around, Michael walked through the back door carrying two huge bags of tropical fish. All Freddie heard that night was fish talk. His mother even served it for dinner.

“Did you study your history today?” his father asked over dinner.

“Yeah, some,” Freddie mumbled. He hadn’t done much more than open his book, glance over a page, then close it again just as quickly. He just felt so restless. Like something big and bad was about to happen and he had no idea what it was. It was an odd sort of feeling, but he hadn’t been able to shake it.

It was a feeling Freddie would soon come to understand all too well. For that next morning, a strange thing happened when he got to school. When he called out to his friends Ernie and Willy, he was shocked to see them look at him, shake their heads, and walk away.

Freddie was stunned. Now why would his friends ignore him like that? He was even more puzzled when others avoided him like he had some contagious disease or something. For a moment he almost laughed. He hoped Michael hadn’t spread that rumor around again that Freddie had contracted leprosy. He’d pulled that stunt last year. If he’d done something like it again, he’d strangle the little monster.

Someone bumped into him, almost knocking him off balance. It annoyed him. He quickly turned to see it was one of his friends.

“Hey, Kevin!” he said, his face breaking into a smile.

Kevin only gave him the silent treatment.

Freddie tried to laugh it off. “Hey. Look, I’m alright. The doctor gave me at least another 50 years to live. No matter what you’ve heard—I’m not sick.”

Kevin’s response was cool and distant. “Oh, yeah? Well that’s a matter of opinion. You’re a sicko in my book, Freddie—a real low life.” And with that he turned and walked away.

Freddie felt fear race through him. Something was terribly wrong. Something terrible had happened within the last 24 hours and he didn’t have a clue what had brought it about. He suddenly noticed that other kids were looking at him and whispering.

He quickly ducked into the washroom, went over to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. His skin felt hot. Behind him he heard a toilet flush and saw Johnny Boykin come out of one of the stalls. Their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror. He saw Johnny look away uncomfortably.

Freddie spun around and confronted him. “Johnny, what’s going on? Why is everybody acting so weird towards me?”

Johnny always stuttered when he got nervous and right now he looked like he wanted to run from the bathroom. “Don’t play dumb, Freddie! Everyone knows why you did it!”

“Did what?” Freddie impatiently shot back.

“You know...”

But Freddie didn’t know and Johnny Boykin was out the bathroom door in a flash, leaving it swinging madly on its hinges, before he could find out.

Freddie wondered if the whole school had either lost their minds or he’d just stepped into the Twilight Zone. There was only one person he knew who he could always count on to give him a straight answer no matter what—Melissa. He caught up to her as she was going into the classroom, grabbed her arm and quickly pulled her aside. She was somewhat startled, but unlike the others her eyes weren’t accusing and scornful.

Melissa was one of those people who'd be your friend through thick and thin, no matter what happened.

“Why is everyone treating me like I have the plague? You've got to know. Tell me.”

She sighed as if it hurt her to even think about it. “Freddie, I didn't want to believe it. It's just not like you. But I was there with the others when they found the stolen money hidden in your desk. That money was the classes' money. Taking it was like personally stealing from every one of us.”

Freddie's mouth dropped open. He'd completely forgotten about the money he'd found on the floor of the coat room. The bell signaled the beginning of first period. He barely noticed Melissa leave him and slip inside the classroom. God, what they must all think of him! Like a man walking to his execution, he turned and walked into class.

His attention was temporarily distracted at the sight of pink and white streamers strung all over the room. On Miss Mark's desk a big birthday cake with pink flowers and white icing spelled out Happy Birthday to the Best Teacher Ever!

Everyone was standing up waiting for her. When she finally stepped into the room the whole class burst out singing “Happy Birthday.”

From the expression on Miss Mark's face she looked as if someone had just knocked the socks off her. She was truly surprised. Freddie stood by his own desk and joined in the singing. He was thankful for all the commotion, which served to downplay his own entrance. Everyone clapped at the end of the song and they all took their seats as David Toohey brought forward a big, flat box and a matching smaller package which were both wrapped in bright pink and white paper. The class was quiet as he made a little speech that sounded as if he had been up all night memorizing it.

“Come on! Get on with it,” someone shouted out from the back of the room. “Open the gift!”

All eyes were on Miss Mark as she carefully unwrapped it. Inside was the most beautiful leather bound desk set with soft, green felt padding. Miss Mark's eyes immediately lit up at seeing it. She oohed and aahed, and blushed and smiled. It was a real show. In the smaller box was a pen and pencil holder with her name engraved on a

small brass plate. Her new accessories now made her desk look like she was some big corporate executive or something.

“I can’t thank you all enough,” she gushed out. “It’s the most beautiful gift I’ve ever received and I’ll treasure it always because it came from all of you.”

“Yeah, with no thanks to Freddie Brenner!” one boy mumbled loud enough for everyone to hear.

For just a second there was an awkward silence in the classroom as everyone turned to stare directly at Freddie. There was this terrible, sick-like feeling in the pit of his stomach—like an animal caught in a trap. He felt his legs quivering and his heart pumping faster. At the front of the room, Miss Mark looked completely baffled.

Words suddenly came rushing out of Freddie’s mouth from no where. “It’s a lie! I swear it. I didn’t steal the money!”

Everyone in the class started talking at once. He heard angry accusations hurled at him from all directions. Miss Mark’s voice, loud and clear, cut through the noise demanding attention.

“Is someone going to tell me what’s going on here?” she asked.

“Freddie stole the money we collected for your present,” someone spoke up. “And then he went and hid it in his desk! We all found it. Just ask David. He’ll tell you.”

Miss Mark looked stricken. Freddie felt like he wanted to die a thousand deaths when she looked at him. She turned to David.

“Is this true?” she asked.

He nodded somewhat quietly. “I had the money in my pocket and the next minute I found it gone. It was stolen and Freddie was the one. Otherwise, why would we have found it in his desk?”

Freddie quickly jumped to his feet. “I didn’t steal the money. I don’t how it got there!”

He wasn’t sure why he didn’t just tell them the whole truth. They probably wouldn’t believe him anyway, which was what he was really afraid of. Would they think he was still lying if he told them that he’d found it and put it there for safekeeping? If

only he hadn't forgotten about it. If only he hadn't been out sick yesterday. All the evidence pointed to him and they'd already hung him in their minds.

Across the room he was startled to hear his friend Kevin say, "Come on, Freddie! Everyone knows how you needed money to buy that dog you wanted!"

Melissa finally spoke up. "I don't believe it. If Freddie intended to spend the money, why was it still in his desk where anyone could find it? And none of it was gone, either."

But the others drowned out her objection. The rest of the day passed like a nightmare. No one would talk to him. He heard whispering behind his back constantly—and laughing. Even Miss Mark avoided looking at him. She'd probably lost all respect for him like everyone else.

During last period a note was slipped to him saying, "Who needs money for a dog, Freddie, when you've got yourself! Only a real dog like you steals from his own classmates." It wasn't signed.

Freddie didn't know how he made it through the day. He wanted to run out of the classroom and hide. He felt close to tears a number of times, but he clenched his teeth and held them back. He was not going to fall apart in front of them.

No one would talk to him. No one wanted to be seen with him. By the end of the day he was sure the whole school had heard the terrible news and the story would probably grow with each telling.

When school was dismissed for the day, he almost ran from the building taking a longer way home so he wouldn't run into anyone he knew. He couldn't bear to hear the bad things they were saying about him.

Without realizing it, he found his steps taking him past the pet store and the promise of seeing his puppy again. The thought made him feel better as he approached the window. But the puppy was not playing in the window and so Freddie went inside to look for him.

"Oh, the black one? I sold him yesterday," the owner informed him.

His heart sank at the news. "But I was going to buy him. I told you I'd get the money."

The owner shrugged his shoulders. “Son, I’m in business to make a living. When I see money in my hand, then that person’s got a deal. Somebody just beat you to it. Sorry, but that’s the way it is.”

Freddie couldn’t bear to hear another word. He turned and walked out of the shop—his steps heavier than ever before. It felt like he was suddenly carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and it was killing him.

No sooner did he reach home than his mother was waiting for him by the door. Her face had a really strange look about it--so strange that it almost frightened him.

“Freddie,” she said. “I just got a call from your school counselor.”

He knew what was coming. Today the whole school would have heard about the money---tomorrow the world. He didn’t even hear half of what his mom was saying. He felt numb, like he’d just been hit by a truck which was turning around to hit him again and finish him off.

“What were you thinking, Freddie?” he heard his mom say. “I just can’t believe what they told me. Just wait until your dad hears about this.”

“I didn’t steal it, Mom,” he said quietly, but she wasn’t listening.

“Go to your room, Freddie! When your dad comes home we’ll talk it over.”

As he left the kitchen, he heard a small sob escape her lips as if he had brought total shame and ruin upon the whole family and nothing would ever be the same again.

He flopped down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling feeling as if his life was slowly coming apart. How could he face anyone ever again? He felt like a total failure. Nothing he did seemed to be right. It would probably only get worse.

He knew he had to escape from all this. He wanted to run and keep on running from the whole terrible mess. Run to a new state, change his name and find a place where no one would know him and where he could start again. Maybe he could find a job or something in this new place. He knew he was a hard worker. He was sure someone would hire him and he’d be able to take care of himself.

Freddie got to his feet and went to the closet for his backpack. He’d have to leave behind a lot of his things. There wouldn’t be room for all his stuff where he was going--wherever that was.

In no time his backpack was stuffed with clothes, flashlight, a pen knife, some matches, compass, a smashed protein bar, and whatever else he could cram inside to help him survive.

He stopped, looked around his room for the last time, and wondered if he should leave a note. In his desk drawer he found a note pad and quickly scribbled:

YOU'LL PROBABLY ALL BE HAPPIER WITHOUT ME.—FREDDIE

It wasn't much of a goodbye note, but it was all he could think of saying right now. He grabbed up his bulging backpack, went over to the window, opened it, and quietly lowered himself down the tree outside his window. It was a little difficult with all his gear, but it was the only way out.

He would have liked to have taken his bike, but he knew his mom would probably spot him sneaking it out of the garage. From now on, he would have to go it alone on foot sticking to the back roads.

He kept a close eye out so no one would notice his departure. He cut through some back lots and headed for the large wooded area beyond his neighborhood. He knew the big highway was on the other side a few miles off. From there, maybe he could hitch a ride South.

He had never run away before in his life—had never even thought of it. It filled him with deep sadness as he worked his way through the brush, keeping to hidden paths so he wouldn't chance running into some jogger along the way. After about an hour, he saw a small bridge up ahead which spanned the narrow end of the river. His steps slowed just a little. He noticed that the water was running high for this time of year, and fast, too. It felt cold by the river and Freddie was thankful for the warmth of his jacket.

His backpack was starting to feel heavy. It made him suddenly think about what little he now had to take care of himself. There was the problem of money. He didn't have any. What little he had was in his savings account at the bank and there was no way to get it now. In the pit of his stomach was an empty feeling reminding him he hadn't eaten much that day. He had half a roll of cherry lifesavers in his pocket and then there was the smashed protein bar. The thought of having to scrounge for food wasn't at all appealing. He started to realize he hadn't planned this whole thing very well.

Winter would be upon him before long. Where would he sleep? On the street? In deserted doorways? As he walked across the bridge he wondered who he was trying to kid. He didn't want to live that way—like some desperate animal. It all seemed so hopeless, but what could he do? His life would be miserable if he stayed here.

He stopped at the middle of the bridge and stared down at the rushing water below. Strong and fast, cold and deep it ran. It could quickly sweep a person along to the dam downstream and the dangerous rocks below that. Would everyone feel sorry for him or miss him if something like that happened to him? He leaned against the railing watching the swirling waters and thinking.

Then he heard a dog bark somewhere nearby. He looked up and saw a white puppy scampering along the bank chasing a low flying bird. It made him smile. The little animal, in its enthusiasm to catch the bird, was getting too close to the slippery bank. Freddie saw it happen before he could stop it. The puppy lost its footing in the mud and tumbled forward right into the cold water. It paddled frantically towards the shore, but the current was too strong for it to make it back.

Freddie pushed away from railing and raced for the shore. He could see terror in the little dog's eyes. All he could think about was saving the puppy's life. He tried reaching out to grab the little dog, but the water was sweeping it away. He stripped off his jacket and plunged into the icy water. He fought his way through the rushing water to reach the animal. He grabbed it to his chest as it went under again, swallowing water. The puppy struggled for breath. Freddie had no idea the river was that strong, but somehow he prayed for strength for them to make it back to shore.

He felt so weak he could barely pull them both back onto the bank, but he did. Sudden exhaustion swept over him as he laid the puppy down on the soft grass next to him. It was still breathing, but it just lay there not moving.

"Come on little, fella," Freddie encouraged him. "You can make it. Everything's going to be alright now."

But the puppy's eyes remained closed and he still did not move.

"Please don't die!" Freddie told him. "I'm here. I'll take care of you."

He curled up next to the puppy, wrapping them both in his jacket and keeping him warm against his body.

“And what about you, Freddie?” he heard a familiar voice ask. “How can you take care of him if you’re going to run away from your own life?”

Freddie knew that voice. He looked up to see his angel guide, Daniel, standing there with deep concern in his eyes. He hadn’t talked to Daniel much lately, or even asked for his help. He wondered what Daniel thought about the stupid mess he’d made of his life.

“You’re giving up too easily,” Daniel answered, reading his thoughts. “It’s not like you at all.”

Freddie couldn’t help think of how hopeless it all seemed. Everyone hated him.

“It would be better if I was dead,” he blurted out, feeling the hurt. “Then you and I could be together. You’re the only one who understands me anyway.”

Daniel did not look at all pleased to hear such words. He shook his head. “I’m afraid it doesn’t quite work that way. I’m here to help you learn how to live and be the best you can be. I can’t make you want to live. No one can. You’ve got to want that for yourself.”

Freddie looked down at the ground and hugged the puppy closer. Daniel sat down next to him. “Remember how I once told you that every person is put on earth to complete a special mission?” Freddie nodded.

“Well, the really bad times are just a test. They test how strong you are and whether you’re up to the mission given you. I’m going to tell you a little secret. Those people that have the most difficult lives—you know, the ones that have to overcome poverty, sickness, or something like you’re going through now—those are the ones who have the really special missions. They’ve taken on a more difficult mission in order to grow the most. Trust me. I know what I’m talking about. You’ve got to be strong to get through this.”

Freddie was thinking about how he sure didn’t feel very strong right now. He was tired of trying to be strong. He felt more like quitting. Maybe they could re-assign him an easier mission or something.

Daniel still looked concerned. “Freddie, do you know what happens when a person turns their back on their special mission? When they give up or even take their own life?”

Freddie wasn't sure he wanted to know. He had a pretty good idea that no one threw you a party.

"The simple fact is that they don't escape the problem. They just have to face it again on the other side and it might be even more difficult."

That didn't sound like much fun either.

"Freddie, it's always better to work it out on Earth. Solutions to problems don't always come overnight. It's like riding out a bad storm. Sooner or later it stops and a rainbow comes out. You're not giving the rainbow a chance. All you can think about is escaping the storm."

Freddie frowned. "No one cares. In a few days they'd forget all about me anyway."

"Are you so sure about that?" Daniel asked. "Maybe we should take a look."

"What do you mean?" Freddie asked.

"Let's go to the movies." And with that Freddie found himself sitting next to Daniel in a circular movie house with only two seats front row center, which they now sat in. The darkened movie screen completely circled them.

"Push the button on the armrest," Daniel instructed.

Freddie pushed a big white button and the screen instantly lit up all around him with hundreds, even thousands of different pictures of him. The puppy huddling against his chest yipped in startled response. It even startled him. There were pictures there from times he'd even forgotten about. When Freddie moved his head all around to see more, his seat moved in the same direction--like some kind of ride at Disney World.

"Cool!" he said moving his head even faster so the seat swept them around the screen, making him dizzy.

"Now press the green button," Daniel said, "If you want to see what happens in the future if you don't come back."

Freddie hung on to the puppy as he pressed the button. The pictures of him dissolved into a moving picture of his living room at home. He immediately saw his mother and father arguing and blaming themselves for his death.

Daniel showed him how to push the button to go forwards or backwards. Freddie held it down for just a split second and it immediately sped forward in time. He saw his

mother crying night and day sitting all alone in Freddie's bedroom. He saw his father so unhappy that he could no longer be a good architect and continue designing great buildings because he could no longer bring himself to go to work. He could hear everything they were saying. There was fighting in the house. So much that Freddie could barely stand to listen to it.

His seat swung around to see his brother Michael looking sad and lost. He could even hear Michael's thoughts. He wanted to run away, too, because all his parents could talk about was "if only Freddie were still here." He saw right away how they seemed to forget about Michael, even ignore him until he was forever feeling lonely and angry.

Freddie could see what was in front of him, behind him and on either side of him. The movie screen showed it all in full detail. He pressed the green button in another direction and the movie sped backwards. He stopped when he saw his friends all together. They were crying, actually crying, when they heard the news of his death. He heard David Toohey's voice behind him and swung his seat around to see him more clearly. David was confessing to everyone that he had been too scared to come forward and tell the truth. He admitted to having a hole in his jacket pocket and having known he had lost the birthday money. Melissa spoke up and said she knew Freddie had probably found it and had just put it in a safe place.

"We all knew Freddie was no thief," he heard Johnny Boykin say, trying not to stutter. "I liked Freddie. He was always really good to me."

Freddie saw and heard his friends talking about how much they would miss him.

"He was the best friend I ever had," Ernie said, his face sadder than ever.

He heard them talk about things Freddie had done for each of them which had meant a lot. Some of the things Freddie barely remembered. He listened with amazement. He never suspected that he had meant that much to any of them.

Then, suddenly, the scene changed and Freddie saw a man finding this dead little puppy by the river dam—dead from drowning. It was the puppy he now held in his arms. For some reason, that really got to him. He felt his eyes well up with tears.

"I guess this means you're mine now," he said, looking into the dog's little eyes. The puppy licked his face in eager response.

Freddie turned to Daniel who had been silent a long time. “I guess I was wrong about a lot of things.” He thought it over. “I guess I really do want to live after all.”

Daniel nodded in agreement. “Then you must be prepared to ride out the remainder of the storm. Remember the story of Noah’s Ark and how it rained 40 days and 40 nights before he saw sign of hope that the worst was over?”

Freddie nodded. He showed a hint of a smile thinking about the worst being how stinky it must of have been in that old Ark with a boatload of animal crap.

Daniel smiled, too, before going on. “Just remember that there will always be a rainbow signaling a brighter tomorrow. Just look for the rainbow. It’s heaven’s promise that the worst is indeed over.”

In the blink of an eye, he was back on the river bank still hugging his puppy. “We’re going to hang in there and make it together,” he said. He suddenly felt so tired. His last thought before falling into an exhausted sleep was that he only hoped it would not take 40 days and 40 nights for his rainbow to appear.

“I found him! I found him!” a voice called out, shining a flashlight in Freddie’s eyes.

For a minute, Freddie didn’t know where he was. It was pitch dark. He felt something licking his hand and it all came back to him.

“You gave your parents quite a scare,” a uniformed officer told him. “Everyone’s been out looking for you for hours.”

It was true. Friends and neighbors alike had taken up the search after Freddie’s parents found the note he’d left behind. Within moments of the police officer calling out he’d been found, Freddie’s dad came running through the woods followed by others with flashlights.

His dad’s face was filled with relief and concern. “I’m sorry Dad,” he said, knowing he was probably in deep trouble for running away in the first place. But his dad just scooped him up into his arms and held him close.

“Thank, God, you’re alright,” he kept saying over and over again.

There was a tiny bark on the ground and Freddie looked down to see the puppy jumping around his dad's legs trying to get to him.

"That little thing fell into the river," he tried to explain. "And I pulled him out. I don't think he has a home. Can he come home with us? Please? Please?"

His dad was so relieved that Freddie was actually safe and sound, that it was easy to get him to agree. "Alright. We'll take him home."

On the way home, the puppy curled up in his lap. He heard all about how they had found his backpack on the bridge and how they had all thought the worst. It made Freddie realize that sometimes things weren't always as they appeared. Maybe his parents would believe him now.

When they got home, his mother and brother ran out to meet them. Like his father, his mother held him close and didn't want to let go. Michael immediately grabbed for the puppy and kept shouting "What's his name? What's his name?"

But Freddie knew that could wait. "Mom and Dad...I didn't steal that money," he said, and then the whole story just spilled out. "You've got to believe me."

"We do, Freddie," his dad said. "I knew you'd never do such a thing. I never had any doubt in my mind."

That surprised Freddie. "I'm sorry about running away and all. I'm sorry about not making better grades, too," he said. "But I couldn't bear everyone being so disappointed in me."

His dad put his arm around his shoulder. "Your mom and I love you too much to be disappointed with you. I didn't tell you this but when I was your age I wasn't very good in history either and your mother can tell you that she was rotten in math."

Well—that really surprised him. His mother was terrific at keeping the household accounts in order. He looked to her and she nodded to confirm the truth of what his dad had said.

"We can't all be good at everything," his dad said. "I wanted you to be smarter than I was. It was wrong and I realize that now."

His mother also put her arm around Freddie. "You're who you are, Freddie. We could never be disappointed with that. We're proud of both our boys. We don't know what we'd do if something happened to either of you."

Freddie knew what would have happened thinking back to the movie. And he hadn't liked what he'd seen. He could have ruined a lot of people's lives and caused a lot of unhappiness because of the way he'd been thinking. He guessed people just never thought much about those things before they did it. He was glad Daniel had shown him what might have happened.

The next day it was hard going back to school and facing his classmates. He knew he had to sooner or later. It was time to ride out the storm, as Daniel had said.

As he walked up the school steps, he heard Daniel whisper in his ear. "Just remember the truth will set you free."

He sure hoped Daniel was right. He tried not to let the other kid's looks get to him as he walked into his classroom. He went to hang up his jacket and ran smack into David Toohey.

Freddie kept his voice low. "David," he began. "I just want you to know that I never would have stolen our class money. I found the envelope on the floor after school and since you'd already left, I hid it in my desk for safekeeping. I didn't want to embarrass you in front of the others, but if I hadn't been out sick the next day you would have had it back in your hands again that morning---and that's the truth."

David looked around nervously as Freddie went on. "I've been honest with you. I wish you'd be honest with me. It's not your fault if you had a hole in your jacket pocket and it accidentally fell out. Those things happen."

David suddenly looked sheepish. "How did you know about the hole in my pocket?"

A loud voice behind them got everyone's attention. "Why, David Toohey! You mean you had a hole in your pocket that you knew about all this time and you let Freddie take the rap?!"

Neither of them had seen Melissa approach and listen in on their conversation. David suddenly looked up horrified that he'd been found out. The news quickly spread

throughout the room. Within a short time, David was up to his ears trying to explain why had had claimed the money had been stolen in the first place.

Miss Mark called them both up to her desk and asked for a full accounting of the story. Freddie couldn't help feel a little sorry for David now that their roles had been reversed. But he had to admit he was sure glad to have his own name cleared. The truth *had* set him free.

Later that afternoon, Daniel joined him as they took the new puppy out for a walk. "It sure isn't easy being a kid, is it?" Freddie said.

"No. I guess not," Daniel laughed.

Freddie was thinking just then about how hard the other kids were now being on David. "He's going to have to face the storm just as you did," Daniel said. "But remember. It will pass."

They came to that same bridge than spanned the river. Freddie noticed how the puppy hung back looking scared at the sound of the rushing water.

"Come on, Rainbow," he called to him.

Daniel grinned. "Looks like you found your rainbow."

"Yeah," Freddie grinned back. "Funny thing about him. No one seems to know where he came from." He looked at Daniel suspiciously. "I don't suppose you would know anything about that now, do you?"

Daniel smiled from ear-to-ear. "Let's just say he was one of those unexpected gifts from heaven."

Freddie thought about that a moment. "You know. Life is pretty wonderful and amazing at times. I guess you have to give it a chance to really find that out." Rainbow barked in agreement as he bravely followed Freddie across the bridge.

THE END

FREDDIE BRENNER'S MYSTICAL ADVENTURES



The Indian Haunting at Malibu Canyon

by Kathy J. Forti

Chapter 6

The Indian Haunting at Malibu Canyon

The Los Angeles Airport was crawling with Thanksgiving travelers. Freddie Brenner was just glad to be escaping to sunny California this year for his turkey dinner. It was colder than a deep freeze back home and had even snowed a few days earlier.

He smiled as warm sunlight flooded his face. He was in the land of palm trees, Disney Land and Hollywood stars. Everyone had a cell phone attached to their ear and sleek expensive sports cars buzzed in and out of every lane with glamorous looking people behind the wheels. LA was full of fast action. He wished he could see who was inside all those long black limousines. Probably rock stars.

His Aunt Margo's job had transferred her to Los Angeles exactly one month ago. She had called his Mom almost every other day saying how lonely for family she was. So here they were for Thanksgiving ready to spend the holidays in her new house that even had a swimming pool.

Aunt Margo was the youngest of his mother's sisters and was pretty cool for an old person. She had promised Michael and him that she'd take them to Universal Studios, Disney Land, and a lot of other attractions. Freddie wanted to see the Pacific Ocean and the surfers. Aunt Margo lived near the ocean in some place called Malibu Canyon, which she told his mother was 'heavenly, absolutely heavenly.'

Aunt Margo met them in her mini van which, Freddie noted with some disappointment, was not nearly as cool as some of the other Jaguars and Porches coming and going. She looked tired, really tired, and right off his mother starts asking the questions.

"I haven't been sleeping well since I moved into the new house," his Aunt explained. "I guess it takes awhile to settle in and get comfortable."

Freddie sometimes had trouble sleeping, too. But not in the morning when it was time to get up. He could sleep through his alarm and just about any other racket Michael inflicted on him each new waking day. He looked over at Michael who was still

grumbling about one of the wheels being broken on his new suitcase. He was dragging it across the pavement, making a lot of racket.

“C’mon, you two,” his Aunt urged. “Before one of those cops gives me a ticket for stopping.”

His Dad hoisted the suitcases into the rear of the van and they all scooted in, only to have traffic move at a crawl for what seemed forever.

“When do we get off this expressway?” Freddie asked.

“It’s not called the expressway,” his Aunt told him.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Freddie said seeing as how slow it was.

“It’s called the freeway, and we’ll be seeing the ocean real soon,” she explained. And soon there it was, as big and blue as ever, with palm trees, and sandy beaches, and a few surfers wearing wet suits riding the waves—just like in the movies. California was just too cool.

They took a turn off Pacific Coast Highway and headed towards Malibu Canyon. About a mile in they saw long white trucks lining both sides of the road with guys moving out lights and cables, and a whole mess of electronic stuff.

“They’re shooting a movie,” his aunt explained. “They use this canyon a lot for exterior shots.”

Talk about a movie woke Michael up. He’d been dozing in the back seat.

“What movie?” he interrupted, all excited. “Are we going to be in a movie?”

Freddie snorted. Michael could be such a jerk.

His aunt only laughed. “No. But I hear they’ll be here filming for a few days. Maybe we can check it out later, if they’ll let us.”

Freddie thought that would be a pretty cool idea. He slipped on his sunshades and smiled. They went up a winding road and then turned into Aunt Margo’s driveway. It was kind of like a large Mexican hacienda style house with an odd pinkish color like nothing he’d ever seen back home. Californians liked strange colors on their houses. And there was cactus everywhere. Big old prickly cactus plants the size of small trees.

While his dad unloaded the luggage, Aunt Margo took his mom on a tour of the house. He could hear his mother “oohing” and “aahing” all over the place. Freddie and Michael made their own tour and headed straight for the only thing that interested them—

the swimming pool. It was a warm day for November. They took one look at the clear blue water, then each other, and without another word stripped down to their underwear and dove right in like two guided missiles hitting their target. They came back up laughing and kicking and spitting. There were some things brothers always had in common.

The rest of the day just flew by. They barbecued outside with steak and corn, went and visited the neighbors' horses, and checked out one of the canyon trails. But as night fell they heard an animal-like cry off in the distance.

Michael shivered. "That sound gives me the creeps. What is it?"

"A coyote," his dad explained. "These canyons probably have quite a few. They usually stay away from people."

"Good!" Michael said yawning loudly.

His mother looked at her watch. "It's already way past your bedtime back home. Let's call it a night."

It was the only time he could remember his brother actually agreeing.

It was still pitch black outside when Freddie awoke with a start, wide awake on the sofa bed in his aunt's study. He sat up a little further to see the clock which read 4:00 a.m. Back home on the East Coast it was 7:00 a.m. and time to get up. The time difference was really throwing him off. He groaned, ready to roll back to sleep. But out of the corner of his eye he caught a shadow or something move across the room. It happened so fast, but man, oh man, it got his attention. He went into high alert mode, not moving a muscle waiting to see if it happened again. Nothing. He relaxed a little, thinking it was probably moonlight reflection. His imagination was surely playing tricks on him.

He sunk back down into the bed, closed his eyes, and then he heard it. It was low at first but then became louder—the sound of horses' hoofs, lots of them, and screams, terrible crazy bloodcurdling screams. Freddie flew out of bed, out of the room, down the stairs and out of the house. He had no idea whether he was running away from the sound

or towards it until he found himself beside the road and watched in disbelief as bands of Indians on horseback raced past him, attacking other Indians. He watched in horror, crouched behind a bush, as they slaughtered each other, a river of blood everywhere. He half expected to see the Calvary come racing in and stop it, but this was an Indian only battle. Off in the distance he heard the sound of women crying followed by an eerie silence. He turned his head just in time to see a very fierce and angry looking Chief with an one-eyed eagle on his arm staring back at him not more than six feet away. He jumped back, almost falling over some cacti, and managed to right himself before he had prickly needles doing an acupuncture treatment on his butt. Then, just like that, it was all gone. The charging horses, the warring Indians, the blood bath, and that one pissed off looking Chief. All gone. It was like a scene right out of the movies. Oh yeah, California was definitely the land of action!

He slowly returned to the house, even more puzzled to find everyone still sleeping. Come to think of it, it was also odd that none of the neighbors had turned on their lights and come out to investigate either. He couldn't figure out how anyone could have slept through all that noise. He sure as hell wasn't going to be getting any more sleep that night. And he figured that if he wasn't going to, neither was his brother.

“Wake up, Michael!”

“Leave me alone. I'm dreaming...”

Freddie gave him a shove. “You are not.”

“Am, too,” he mumbled his eyes still closed. “I'm an Indian warrior coming home from battle.” He smiled. “They're making me chief.”

Freddie yanked off the covers and gave him another shove. “Well you missed the battle, Kimosabe. They just shot a movie scene here, right outside on the road, with Indians and all. I swear it was like the real thing.”

Michael sat up straight, rubbing his eyes. “They shot a movie scene? Right here?”

Freddie nodded. “Yep.”

Michael shoved Freddie right back. “That’s for not waking me sooner!”

His Aunt Margo was in the kitchen making cranberry pancakes shaped like turkeys for breakfast. He had to love that about her even though Thanksgiving was still a few days off. While Michael helped flip pancakes, he told her all about the night before.

Before he could even finish, she was shaking her head, clearly confused. “Freddie, I didn’t hear a thing last night. Are you sure you didn’t dream this?”

Michael flipped a pancake, chopping off a turkey head. “Ooops,” he said trying to reattach it onto the turkey’s rear end. “Yeah. I had a dream about Indians last night, too.”

Freddie shook his head. “No, it couldn’t be a dream. It was too real. It had to be those movie people.”

His aunt only shrugged. “I don’t think they film that early in the morning when people are still sleeping.”

Freddie frowned. He knew he was right. He grabbed a handful of pancakes and walked out the kitchen door just as his parents came down for breakfast.

“Hey! Where are you going with those pancakes?” Michael called out.

“Start without me. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Freddie stuffed the pancakes in his mouth and kept on going. He found a girl’s bicycle in the garage, jumped on, and set off down the road to get some answers. About a mile away he saw the big white trucks of the movie people.

Big guys, with bulging muscles, were setting up camera equipment and laying down little railroad tracks to mount the camera on. They were laying electrical cables hooked up to a large generator, and bringing out enough sound equipment to stage a rock concert. He cautiously skirted around them trying to look invisible. They didn’t look like they’d be too happy to have him lurking around all their expensive stuff.

He hid the bike behind a bush and followed the cables down over a hill. That's when he saw them. Teepees—a whole Indian village of them—everywhere. He saw women applying war paint and makeup to the actors playing Indians. One woman was having her hair braided, another was putting on a black wig. A few actors were coming in and out of a large trailer half dressed, carrying cups of steaming hot coffee. And there were horse trailers everywhere. It all looked too familiar to him. These guys had to be his nightly visitors.

He edged forward, only to feel a firm but gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked around and up into the wizened old face of what had to be a real honest to goodness Indian. His long grey hair was tied back into a ponytail and he was dressed in well worn cowboy boots and jeans.

“Son, you looking for something?” the Indian asked.

Freddie saw the Indian's eyes were gentle and instead of running, he just smiled. He looked back down at where Indian women were basket weaving and braves were skinning a deer.

“It looks so real. I've never seen anything like it.”

The Indian nodded and remained silent.

Freddie looked back at him questioningly. “Were you one of the Indians that came through my Aunt Margo's neighborhood last night during the battle scene?”

The Indian frowned. “Last night?”

“Yeah. It woke me up. I went outside and saw all the horses come through and all these Indians killing other Indians. It was awesome. It scared the...” He stopped, remembering he was talking to an adult. “Well--you know out of me.”

The Indian shook his head. “No filming last night.” He looked at Freddie curiously, then shrugged turning away. “Probably a dream.”

“It wasn't a dream. It was real!” Freddie said. “And I saw the chief. He had this big eagle on his arm that had only one eye.”

The Indian quickly turned back around. “You saw Chief Ninus?” he said suspiciously.

“Who's he?”

The Indian motioned Freddie away from the movie set's comings and goings and near the quiet of the creek bed where movie horses were grazing. He sat down on a nearby log and introduced himself.

"I'm Philip Eagle Feather of the Chumash Indians. They call me Eagle Feather."

"And I'm Freddie Brenner from Virginia," he said sitting down on the log next to this Eagle Feather guy. "So, who is this Chief Ninus?"

"He is a legend—a great chief from other lands who traveled over great distances with his people and made friends with the Chumash tribe here in Malibu Canyon."

Freddie pitched a stone into the creek. "And is he in the movie?"

Eagle Feather chuckled. "Not likely. He died hundreds of years ago in a great battle right here in this area."

"But I saw him!"

"What you saw was his spirit and the one-eyed eagle that always travels with him. There have been other sightings of the Chief over the years. He is a restless spirit. Some say he is trying to deliver a message."

Eagle Feather looked at him curiously. "Did he speak?"

Freddie shook his head. He was still trying to get used to the idea that he'd witnessed a full scale ghostly battle last night. He would have hidden under his blankets rather than go outside had he known the truth. Speak to him? Chief Ninus had looked like he wanted to scalp him.

Eagle Feather nodded toward the movie set. "This film is about the Chumash Indians. It must have stirred Ninus' spirit back to the canyon. If you see him again, you let me know."

It was a reluctant and very tired Freddie who finally went to bed that night. His family had spent the day at Disney Land after he'd returned from talking with Eagle Feather. He hadn't told anybody about what he'd learned. He figured that one: They might not believe him, and two: If they did--no one would sleep a wink that night. No wonder his Aunt Margo hadn't been sleeping well. Who wanted to sleep on a nighttime

battle ground site with hundreds of restless spirits? Maybe that's why the last owner had sold the house.

He'd felt wired and on high alert the minute he got back into the Aunt Margo's house. Part of it was he had eaten too many corn dogs and pizza and ice cream at Disney Land. Michael had crashed early, still wearing the Indian headdress he'd bought at the Frontier Land souvenir shop. His brother never had trouble sleeping, the little creep.

Freddie had his new Adventure Land flashlight right beside him that he'd bought that day in the Magic Kingdom. He believed in being ready--just in case of anything. And he planned on using it if this Chief Ninus decided to come calling again.

It was close to midnight before he finally fell into a deep asleep where he dreamed of walking through a deserted Indian village that had been burned. A one-eyed eagle circled overhead following him. He stopped and looked up, watching it soar on the currents. Then it banked and swooped straight down towards him. He started to run, knowing it was coming after him like in some scary movie. He could feel it close on his heels, almost at his shoulder. He panicked, his heart ready to burst out of his chest.

Freddie woke up with a start in bed, feeling his heart still racing. He was about to explain it away as only a dream until he saw the one-eyed eagle perched on his bedpost staring back at him with that beady little eye. It had come straight from the dream world right into his real world. How had his life suddenly become the night of the living dead? He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. His desperate distress signal must have traveled on the speed of light straight to his angel guide Daniel, for suddenly he was there beside him.

But to make matters worse, Daniel wasn't the only one who came calling. His room was now filled with Indians and that Chief Ninus was leading the pack. With trembling hands, Freddie shined his flashlight around the room only to see a lot of stern looking warrior braves. They readied their weapons—bows and arrows and tomahawks. When they saw Daniel they stepped back. Even in the spirit world they recognized that here was someone who was a notch above them.

“Who are you?” the Chief demanded. “What are you doing on my land?”

Daniel didn't seem a bit surprised by the odd question. “Its okay, Chief. We're here to help you move on.”

Freddie could barely get the words out. “We are?”

The Chief stepped forward. “We will not leave this land—ever! It is ours!” He pointed his spear at Freddie and Daniel. “Now begone you evil spirits!”

“But you’re dead!” Freddie blurted back. “Other people live here now.”

This only seemed to further anger the Chief. “You try to trick us with words! My people and I will never leave it. It is ours to protect!” He waved his spear menacingly at Freddie who desperately wanted to hide under the bed.

He was glad Daniel stepped in before he became human barbecue on a spit. Daniel had only to look at the spear and it instantly turned into a beautiful gold peace pipe. Chief Ninus and his warriors moved back in awe. They all started murmuring at once, “Great White magic!”

Daniel extended his hand in a sign of peace. “Chief Ninus, tell us in your own words what happened to your people and this land.”

The Chief’s braves looked to him and waited. The Chief held his head high, commanding attention.

“My people and I traveled a far distance to settle with our friends the Chumash. We helped strengthen their tribe by our numbers and our hunting skills. Chief Sawus was my friend. But when the Gods of the heavens did not bring rain to nourish the land, and water was scarce, Chief Sawus became very ill. When he died, as well as some of the elders, other Chumash tribes believed we had sent evil spirits to take the rain from the sky, and kill Sawus to take his land. This was a great lie.

There were some that plotted against us, believing we had more food than them and were not sharing our bounty. These were a bad lot and brought much trouble wherever they went. We did not see it coming. They came in the middle of the winter night when the moon was full. They killed my men and all the women and children. They burned the village so no one would survive to tell the story and reveal their great evil. The land now cries the song of the pain of my people. We cannot desert it.”

The great one-eyed eagle flapped his huge wings in agitation. The Chief extended his arm to the bird and he immediately flew to it.

“My great eagle friend, Talon, lost his eye and life trying to warn us, but it was too late.”

Freddie felt bad for the Chief and his people. What happened was terrible. He'd seen for himself those attackers last night. They were a fierce lot. He never thought about Indians fighting other Indians. He thought they only fought the white men. It seemed that there were bullies and troublemakers in any race.

"How can we help them, Daniel?" he asked because Daniel always seemed to have the right answer.

The Chief and his braves looked to Daniel who looked thoughtful. "There are new lands waiting for you and your people they tell me. Beautiful green lands with mountains and lakes and clean water and good hunting grounds. They await you on the other side, but you must be willing to make that journey."

The Chief looked suspicious. "And who will save and cleanse our land here? And how do we know we can trust you?"

"Oh, you can trust him," Freddie chimed in. "He never lies. He works for God. You know--the Big Spirit in the Sky."

The braves looked to their Chief who still looked unsure.

"Freddie will make sure the land is blessed and cleansed," Daniel volunteered.

"I will?" Freddie asked, not sure how he would ever pull that off.

The Chief was still not convinced. "We will consider it, if the boy proves himself." And then they were all gone with the sound of flapping wings.

Daniel stayed behind grinning at Freddie.

"Oh great!" Freddie said. "It's not funny. How am I supposed to save his land? And if I fail, will his band of Indians come after me?"

"You'll think of a way. The land requires human intervention. I have faith in you to figure it out."

Freddie was not so sure about that. He was only going to be in town a few more days after Thanksgiving. That didn't give him much time.

"They're caught in between worlds right now," Daniel explained. "They can't let go of the past and keep reliving the events of that night. Sometimes souls need help to make the transition to the other side. His people want to go, but will not leave without their Chief leading the way. You're going to have to convince him it's worth the move."

Daniel turned the flashlight off. "Pleasant dreams, Freddie."

It was the day before Thanksgiving and his mother and Aunt were off early doing grocery shopping for the big dinner the next night. His dad, poor thing, had somehow gotten roped into fixing little broken things all over the house. He was tinkering with the garbage disposal after breakfast and not having much luck.

Freddie went off to take a dip in the pool with Michael. He spent time fishing out dead bugs from the filter trap until he got bored. Then he had a better idea.

“Hey, Michael,” he called over to his brother who was taking a break from diving for coins. “You want to meet a real Indian?”

“Where?”

“Down the road. His name is Eagle Feather.”

“You met an Indian and didn’t tell me?”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Their dad was too wrapped up in fixing the drain to object to them roaming the neighborhood on their own. Now, their mother would have been another story. Freddie was glad she wouldn’t be home for awhile. Mothers worried too much. He made sure Michael had no idea they were headed to the movie set or he’d go and blab it for sure to their dad. He figured he’d keep it a surprise for a little while longer.

He motioned Michael to hop up on the bicycle’s handlebars and Freddie peddled the two of them down the winding tree-lined road toward the foot of the canyon. Freddie wasn’t even sure the movie people would still be there today, being so close to Thanksgiving. But as luck would have it, they hadn’t left yet. He could see them moving equipment back into the long trucks.

“Wait until you see over that crest,” Freddie said cycling faster past some guards before they were stopped. “You won’t believe it.”

Michael hopped off the bike when Freddie slowed and sprinted for the top of the crest. He saw his brother's eyes almost pop out in disbelief.

"Wow!" was all he could say over and over again as he took in all the Indian actors and village below. The village was crowded around two Indian braves circling each other with sharp hunting knives. The camera crew was coming in for close up shots of the fight. The camera was set up on special train tracks, capturing every moment as the two lunged back and forth at each other.

Freddie and his brother watched in silent wonder as the crowd parted and the Chief came into view in full Indian ceremonial dress. He raised his spear and threw its pointed tip between the two braves, just missing their skin by barely an inch. The braves jumped backward out of the way and looked to their angry Chief. Every eye in the crowd also watched to see what the old Chief would do next. It was an awesome moment. And for Freddie even more so because the Chief was none other than Philip Eagle Feather himself.

"Cut!" the director shouted out. "That's it for today. Be back on set at 6:00 a.m. Friday. Everybody have a good Thanksgiving!" And with those words, everyone scattered in different directions at once.

"That was just too cool!" Michael said in awe as he continued to watch the crew come in and start breaking down the set.

"Follow me and don't say a word," he instructed his brother as he made his way down to the village.

A sound guy carrying boom microphones stopped them before they even made it to the Indian clearing. "You kids better get outta here!"

"I'm here to see Eagle Feather," Freddie quickly explained.

"Sorry. No can do. Now scram!" The big guy said blocking their way.

That's when Michael started screaming "Eagle Feather" at the top of his lungs. Even Freddie hadn't seen that coming. His brother had the biggest mouth this side of the Mississippi and everyone on set heard it and looked over.

"Hey, Phil---you got company!" someone shouted out.

The Chief, still in full dress and carrying his spear, started walking towards them and that's when Michael went dead silent. He just looked at that spear and edged behind Freddie for protection, becoming smaller by the second.

"You know this kid?" the sound man asked the Chief.

Eagle Feather smiled and nodded towards Freddie.

"Yeah, I know this kid. He's okay."

The sound guy walked off and the Chief nudged Michael with his spear. "But I'm not so sure about this 'Roars Like Lion' cub you brought with you."

"That's my brother, Michael. He didn't mean to make so much noise. Did you?"

He looked at Michael who only ignored him and continued to stare at Eagle Feather instead.

"Are you a real Chief?" Michael asked.

"No. Actually I'm a medicine man, but I look the part and I don't have to say much except look fierce and angry. How did I do?"

"You were great!" they both said at the same time.

Eagle Feather looked at Freddie with a curious and knowing look.

"I can see that 'Boy Who Talks With Spirits' has something to tell me. Why don't you and 'Roars Like Lion' wait for me while I change out of my costume and I'll show you around."

Eagle Feather was true to his word. He took them into the large costume tent where actors were still washing off redskin makeup, and turning in wigs, costumes, and beaded jewelry. They saw the prop people store baskets, pots, and weapons in trailers filled with numbered racks. They saw horses being brushed down and fed before loading them back into trailers.

Michael ran towards the biggest tepee and peeked in. "Is this the Chief's tent?"

Eagle Feather invited them in to look around. There were still some blankets inside, but the prop men had pretty much emptied it of anything else. In the middle of the teepee was this fire pit to keep it warm on cold nights.

Eagle Feather sat down by the fire pit and instructed the two boys to join him.

They were all silent for awhile, feeling like they had stepped back into another time hundreds of years ago. You could almost hear Indian chanting outside the tent and the howl of the wind through the trees. Finally, Eagle Feather looked towards Freddie. “You have something to tell me?”

“Chief Ninus spoke,” he said.

Then before Michael could interrupt wanting to know who Ninus was, along with a million other questions, Freddie ploughed ahead and told the story of what happened the night before. He told him of the one-eyed eagle coming from his dreams to his bed, and Daniel coming to his rescue and all about what happened to Chief Ninus’ people. He hardly stopped to take a breath. The words just tumbled out of him.

“He says the land has much sadness and he will not leave it until it is cleansed and blessed,” Freddie finally explained. “And he wants me to prove myself by doing it or I don’t know what will happen.”

Michael mumbled something that sounded like, “They’d have to tear out my toenails and torture me to get me to sleep in that room.”

Eagle Feather was deep in thought before finally speaking. “I will help you ‘Boy Who Talks With Spirits.’ It is a full moon tomorrow and will help carry powerful medicine man magic. Be ready and waiting. I have a plan.”

“You invited how many Indians for Thanksgiving dinner?” his Aunt Margo almost screamed when she heard the news.

Michael, as always, had wasted no time in racing back to the house to break the news. “Just three. It will be so cool,” he proudly proclaimed.

Freddie would have given anything to have had the Chief’s spear to shut his little brother up. This was the kind of news he’d learned from experience that you had to break gently. He quickly jumped in and tried to do damage control.

“It will be like the first Thanksgiving again between the new settlers and the Indians,” Freddie tried to explain to both his aunt and mother. “It will be memorable. Trust me. One of them is a real medicine man.”

His father walked in from outside to hear his mother say, “And just where did you meet these Indians?”

Michael chimed in, “One is playing the Chief at the movie set. The other two are his apparatuses.”

“His apprentices,” Freddie corrected. “They’re training to be medicine men in the Chumash tribe.”

“Medicine men??” his father joked. “Is somebody sick?”

“The boys invited some strange Indians to our Thanksgiving dinner,” his mother explained.

His father, God bless him, smiled and took it in stride. “Sounds interesting. I’m sure we’ll have enough turkey to go around. Just so long as I don’t have to dress up like a pilgrim.”

Eagle Feather and his two apprentices, Running Bear and Little Cloud arrived promptly at sundown all cleaned and nicely dressed and introduced themselves to everyone who came to the door to meet them. Freddie felt a moment of disappointment that they hadn’t come in full Indian dress. That would have really impressed his parents. They carried Thanksgiving offerings of rice and corn in Indian bowls, except none of it had been cooked.

His Aunt Margo took one look at the uncooked rice and corn they’d brought and didn’t know what to say except, “Oh”.

Eagle Feather read her face and smiled. “It is for the spirit blessing,” he explained handing it to her. “Not for eating.”

His Aunt Margo uttered another “Oh” and invited them in, still very much puzzled about what to do with it. She finally just put it on the dining room table with the rest of the food and invited everyone to take a seat.

His dad stood at the head of the table, carving the turkey, while both his parents asked questions of their Indian guests. His mother was especially curious.

“So, Chief,” she said, passing the mashed potatoes.

Eagle Feather quickly explained. “I am not a chief, ma’m, but a medicine man. I lead my people in the healing ways of the spirit. ‘Talks with Spirits here,’” he said motioning to Freddie, “asked me to help heal the spirits of this house and land.”

Surprise and confusion spread like a bad rash across the faces of his mother, father, and aunt. Each turned to Freddie for some explanation.

Eagle Feather looked at their stunned faces and then at Freddie. “You didn’t tell them?” he asked.

Freddie looked sheepish. “Well, I was getting around to that.”

Michael chirped in. “Yeah. Tell them all about the Indian ghosts that came in the night to your room and how scared you were.”

Aunt Margo’s mouth dropped open and she set down her fork. His mother’s eyes grew as wide as saucers and practically choked on her last bite. She reached for her water glass and took hefty gulps. Running Bear and Little Cloud kept on eating like it was no big deal. His dad shifted uneasily in his chair and had that ‘you’d better start explaining really fast young man’ look on his face. Oh, boy he was in trouble.

And then it all rushed out in a flood of words—everything. It all sounded too fantastic to believe, but then truth was often stranger than fiction. And he was no liar.

“There was a great tribal massacre on this land,” Eagle Feather explained backing Freddie up. “My ancestors are restless. They chose ‘Talks With Spirits’ to come to for help.”

Michael was not to be left out. “And my name is ‘Roars Like Lion’. I’m helping, too.”

Little Cloud chuckled to himself and ruffled Michael’s hair.

Whether his family believed all he’d said or not, he was grateful at least that they did choose to listen and possibly learn. It wasn’t every day one had real honest to goodness medicine men come to one’s house to heal it. He didn’t know if anything would work, but it was worth a try.

Aunt Margo seemed to think so, too, especially since she hadn't been sleeping very well since she's moved in. "What can we do?" she asked Eagle Feather.

He nodded to her. "We must prepare for the Ghost Dance."

Freddie stared into the crackling bright flames of the fire Eagle Feather and his helpers had built in on a bare stretch of land next to Aunt Margo's house. It blazed hot and fierce, sending smoke curling up into the nighttime sky where a full moon cast an eerie light unto the scene below. His senses were on high alert watching and waiting, as were his parents and aunt who sat around the gathered circle. Michael sat next to him, insisting on wearing his Disney Land Indian headdress.

Eagle Feather, now dressed in his own buckskins and leather and a band of black and white feathers around his neck, chanted in low tones and threw strange smelling plants on the fire that he called 'sage'.

His spirit guide Daniel had come to watch the ceremony. He quietly told Freddie that the sage was for cleansing the land and the chanting were prayers offered to the dead. Eagle Feather acknowledged Daniel's presence by staring right at him and nodding. No one else seemed to be aware of Daniel's arrival. And if they were, they certainly weren't saying anything.

Running Bear and Little Cloud slowly danced around the fire in a counter-clockwise motion singing strange sounding Indian songs. They wore white paint on their faces and wrapped themselves in woven Indian blankets. Their voices rose and fell as they crouched and straightened.

Michael stared ahead as if in a trance as he watched the dancers drop their blankets and raise both hands up to the sky, still dancing. Eagle Feather scattered little bits of the uncooked rice and corn into the fire, sending up sizzling sparks. The chanting became louder, the sound carrying on the stillness of the night.

That's when Freddie heard a great flapping of wings. He could tell from everyone else's faces that they heard it too.

Michael edged closer to him. "Ah, oh..." he gulped.

The Indians' chanting became even louder, more steady, and Eagle Feather got to his feet and joined the other two dancers.

Talon, the one-eyed eagle, flew in from no where, his great wing span the size of a man's height. He came to rest on a large rock and with him came the spirits of hundreds of Indians behind him and they just kept on coming. It was awesome and scary at the same time.

This time there was no mistaking who saw what from the looks around the fire. Everyone saw it. His mother and Aunt Margo's eyes were practically bugging out. Freddie couldn't help smiling. This was really getting good.

Through the throng of Indians came Chief Ninus still as stern and fierce as ever.

"You!" he said pointing to Freddie.

Beside him Daniel nudged him forward. "Go on, Freddie. Go prove yourself. He can't hurt you."

Freddie wasn't so sure about that, but he stepped forward and spoke up. "Chief, I brought Eagle Feather and his people here to help you." As if on cue, Eagle Feather threw more sage on the fire and took up a song of sorrow. Running Bear and Little Cloud joined him.

Chief Ninus' face softened as the hundreds of Indians behind him took up the song. It spread through their ranks with great weeping and crying by the women and children.

"It's time to move on to your new lands," Freddie said. "Don't be scared. Daniel will show you the way."

The Chief hesitated. Whether he feared moving on or not, he wasn't about to admit it. "How do we know you can be trusted?"

Daniel stepped forward. "Chief, there's someone waiting for you on the other side. You're just going to have to trust us and see for yourself."

The Chief was still uncertain. He pointed to Freddie. "He goes with!"

Daniel hesitated at hearing that, thinking it over. "He can go with you only so far. These are Indian lands. He cannot stay with you."

And then the sky opened up onto this large tunnel where light spiraled through it. It beckoned. Eagle Feather brought out the sacred pipe, its pouch filled with tobacco, and

took long puffs on it, sending smoke rings into the air. He offered the pipe to Chief Ninus who took it and the smoke seemed to curl right through him. He handed it back and looked towards the bright tunnel.

“Come on,” Freddie said holding out his hand. “I’m not scared. You’re people won’t be scared either if you lead them through. And Daniel said there are those waiting for you.”

Chief Ninus held his head high with great dignity and moved forward, motioning his people to follow.

Freddie walked into the tunnel with Daniel, feeling that familiar pull. He had been in the tunnel before and had come back. It was the only way to get from this world to the next. He watched as hundred of Indians, singing their song, now one of hope and promise, followed behind their chief. There were women and children and braves on horseback and they looked like they very much wanted to go and see for themselves what this new land held.

It wasn’t long before they came to the end of the tunnel and to Chief Ninus’ surprise it opened up onto lush green lands with mountains and trees and crystal clear lakes filled with a bounty of fish.

The Chief looked around at the beauty, still not sure if it was a trick. Then two Indians on horses galloped into view and came to meet him on wild horses that raced with the wind. The Chief’s face lit up into a big smile at seeing them. His eyes danced with excitement.

“Ninus, what took you so long?” the older Indian called out. “The elders have been waiting a long time for you.”

Chief Ninus let out a loud Indian whoop. “Sawus, my old friend! Is it really you?”

The older Indian reined in his horse. “Many moons have passed. We prayed you would find the way and now you’re here at last. Let us not delay. We have much news to share.”

He motioned Ninus towards his horse and Ninus swung himself up on it behind his friend. He turned back to Freddie and Daniel.

“My people thank you and the land thanks you. We will not forget your great deed. Goodbye my friends.”

The two Indians raced off and the tribe followed amidst much laughing and great rejoicing. At last they had reached their promised land. Their long sorrow was over and a new life would begin.

Freddie felt himself speed back through the tunnel faster than a speeding bullet and back to the fireside circle of his family and Indian guests. He saw Talon fly overhead and drop a feather towards Freddie before flying through the tunnel to join the tribe. The tunnel closed up behind the Great Eagle, sealing it off. All was silent once again. Freddie caught the feather as it slowly floated down to Earth. It was still warm and soft.

“Where did that feather come from?” Michael asked running forward, wanting to see it.

His parents and aunt moved towards him as well, still looking stunned by all they had seen. His mother was first to speak.

“Where did all those Indians go? One minute they were right over there,” she said pointing, “Then they were gone. Was I imagining it all?”

Freddie saw her confusion. “You mean you didn’t see them go through the tunnel to the other side?”

“What tunnel?” his father asked.

“Daniel and I helped them thru the tunnel to their new lands. You didn’t see that?”

Aunt Margo shivered with a chill. “I heard this flapping sound and saw Indians and then ‘poof’ they were gone. If they went through a tunnel, I didn’t see it, did you?” She looked to the others who shook their head.

Freddie wasn’t sure why they hadn’t been able to see it all, but he saw the strange smile on Eagle Feather’s face and knew he hadn’t been alone in what he had experienced.

“Wow, that’s a real eagle feather!” Michael declared, looking it over more closely. “My teacher says that eagles are an endangered species and it’s against the law to have their feathers unless you’re an Indian medicine man.”

Freddie already knew that. He would have loved keeping the beautiful feather, but he knew who would treasure it more. He walked over to Eagle Feather and held it out to him in offering.

“This should really be yours. You helped Chief Ninus and his people and his land. I think they would have wanted you to have it.”

Eagle Feather took the feather and nodded. “The eagle is the carrier of messages between the spirit world and our world. By sharing his feathers with you, it is his way of saying he will always be connected to you wherever he is. It is a very good sign.”

That was cool with Freddie, just as long as he didn’t scare him in the middle of the night by landing on his bed again.

Running Bear and Little Cloud started gathering their things.

“Our work here is done,” Eagle Feather said. “Our ancestors are at rest and the land will begin to heal. Many good journeys to you ‘Talks With Spirits’.”

Then they got into their pick up truck and everyone waved them off.

“Well, this sure is one Thanksgiving I’ll never forget,” Aunt Margo said shaking her head.

His mother and father readily agreed as they walked back to the house under the bright light of the full moon. Freddie and Michael put out the fire, dragging their heels now that the grown-ups had moved on.

“What was the tunnel like, Freddie?” Michael asked.

“It’s fast and full of light and Daniel tells me we travel through it when we come into life being born and go back out when we die.”

Michael kicked more dirt on the fire. “So why didn’t the Indians go through it when they died hundreds of years ago?”

Freddie shrugged. “I guess they were too scared to let go of their land and way of life. They kind of allowed themselves to get trapped here like other spirits stuck between worlds.”

Michael nodded in satisfaction. “Do you think they’re happy now?”

Freddie chuckled. “Oh, yeah! I think they’re much happier.”

It took awhile before everyone settled down enough to finally go to bed for the night. Michael sheepishly came into Freddie's room asking if he could sleep with him.

"My bed is too lumpy," Michael tried to explain, but Freddie knew better. No one was sure what would happen that night after all that they had already seen and heard.

"Sure. Climb in," Freddie said, scooting over. "But don't hog the covers."

It seemed like forever before Freddie finally drifted off into sleep, amidst Michael's snoring. And his dreams were so vivid and real. He dreamed he was a large bird soaring over the land, much like Talon, the Great Eagle. He could feel the wind's currents under his large wing span as he dipped about mountainous peaks, over clear sparkling blue lakes, and lush green grassland that rolled on for miles. It was beautiful.

He saw herds of buffalo grazing and wild horses racing across the hilly plain. He saw deer and antelope in the forests that opened up onto a huge bustling Indian village, much larger than even the movie set, and there were celebrations going on.

He glided down to a stone perch atop a cliff and scanned the people and land below. He turned his great bird-like head and saw Daniel sitting beside him doing the same.

"You have become one with the Spirit of the Great Eagle," Daniel said. "It means you will always be able to see what lies beyond in both worlds. It is a powerful totem that marks a great leader of his people. It means you have proven yourself."

At that moment, Talon joined them on the rocky ledge and they quietly watched the dancing Indians, listening to the steady beat of the drums, and seeing the hunting parties carrying in animals for their great feast.

Freddie saw Chief Ninus and Chief Sawus smoking their sacred pipe and he knew all would be well.

"That's the best night's sleep I've had since I've moved in this house," his Aunt Margo said over breakfast the next morning. Everyone seemed to agree. "That Indian magic really seemed to have worked. I think I could take on anything right now. "

Freddie was feeling pretty good himself. "Anything?" he asked.

“Anything!” his aunt answered confidently.

Freddie smiled. Oh boy was she asking for it. “In that case, why don’t we start with Universal Studios, then Hollywood, then the beach and Santa Monica Pier, then...”

What could he say? He just loved the energy of California. And besides--life was just full of new adventures.

THE END

About the Author

Kathy J. Forti is a writer, inventor, TV Producer, and a clinical psychologist. The Freddie Brenner Mystical Adventures are based on many of her own experiences with the mystical. First published in 1984 by Stillpoint Publishing under the title *The Door to the Secret City*, new adventures have since been added and it is now being offered free to children everywhere.

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