

*If you would stay, if you would fight,
If to my side you'd cleave,
Then great adventures, wisdom, truth
Will your ways never leave.*

—Adon, King of Uwd

Forty-Five Years Ago

One

Franklin Higgenbotham Fields squirmed in the back seat of his parents' station wagon. He knew what was coming. He'd be grounded. And worse. No TV for a week. Maybe two.

Mom turned around, and here came the pointing finger. "Franklin, we *told* you to behave. Can't you just once do what we say?"

The angry vein in her forehead was probably showing. It was too dark to tell. If he turned on the light in the ceiling of the car, he might be able to see it. He only got to see the vein when she was especially furious with him. His hand lifted toward the light in the ceiling, but he forced it back into his lap with his other hand. He'd seen a lot of that vein lately anyway.

"Okay, Mom," he said.

She faced front. "Honestly."

To Franklin's right, Perfect Roger stared out the window, his chin cupped in the palm of his hand. He snorted a perfect snort and shook his perfect head. Ever since he went into high school last year, he acted like it was a shame he had to share the Earth with anyone but his girlfriend.

On Franklin's left, his sister Mae quietly hummed a song from an old movie. This week it was *Gone with the Wind*. "La laaaaa la laah." It was *To Have and Have Not* for a while, but this week Humphrey Bogart lost out to Clark Gable. "Oh, Rheyett," she said.

It would be a bad idea for Franklin to wrinkle his eyebrows at her right now and call her Scarlett, but the words were right there pressing against the insides of his lips. He slapped his hands over his mouth so when the words came out they sounded like "Mph-mph-mph." Then the words were gone so he could drop his hands.

Dad's head swiveled back and forth. He'd never take his eyes off the road while he was driving, so right now he probably looked like that Felix the Cat clock with the eyes going back and forth. But Franklin couldn't see that from the back seat.

Finally Mom said to Dad, "It'll be a long time before the Beasleys invite us back. If they ever do."

Before he could stop himself, Franklin said, "It was so boring I had to do something."

Mom spun around in her seat. She jabbed her finger toward him. "Shut that mouth," she said. "Just shut it. Why do you always—"

"Franklin," Dad said. "What did I tell you this morning?"

Mom shook her head and turned around.

"Sorry," Franklin said. He seemed to be sorry all the time. Either he did something that made people sad, or said something that made them mad.

“Franklin?” Dad repeated gently. “What did I tell you this morning?”

“Think before I talk.”

“That’s right. And what should you think about before you talk?”

Franklin tried to piece together what Dad had told him. The memories were floating around in his mind, all the *whys* and *hows* and *whats* Dad had said. But his thoughts were like flies buzzing around that you tried to grab. They kept getting away.

“What did I tell you?” Dad waited.

“I don’t remember.”

Dad sighed. “Will it make...” He made a circle in the air with a hand to let Franklin know he was supposed to finish it.

“Will it make things better if I say it?”

“Good. What else?”

“I don’t remember.”

Under his breath, Perfect Roger said, “Worthless.”

“Is now the time...” Dad started.

“Is now the time to say it?” Franklin finished.

“Good. I want you to think about that before you speak, okay?”

“I’ll try.”

But Franklin didn’t think such a thing was really possible. If other people did that, he wondered how people ever said anything. And anyway, it *had* been boring at the Beasleys’. All the grown-ups had been just sitting around like talking was fun. And Emily Beasley seemed happy to sit there on her dad’s lap. She hardly noticed he was there.

The car thumped over a pothole and Franklin bounced up and down and up and down. He wondered how hard he could jam his lap up into the seatbelt. The bouncing felt good and he kept it going, but his lap started to hurt after a few minutes so he made it more of a circle-bounce. Off the seat, off Perfect Roger, off the seatbelt, off Scarlett Mae, and off the seat. Down-side-up-side-down-side-up-side-down...

Perfect Roger jabbed his elbow in Franklin’s ribs. “Knock it off, hypo.” His face scrunched into a perfect scowl. He turned back to the window.

Up-down, up-down, up-down...

Roger’s forearm pressed Franklin down into the seat.

The bounce came out his legs and feet, thumping on the floorboard.

“Would you stop that, Franklin?” *The vein speaks.*

Roger snapped his arm back to his side.

Dad said, “I thought something was wrong with the car for a second there.”

Franklin sat very still for five seconds.

His heartbeat thudded in his ears. He put his hand on his chest to feel it palalump. The neck. One hand still on his chest, with his other hand he searched between the pipes in his neck until he found the artery pulse just an instant behind his heartbeat. A man in India could slow his heart and breathing so much he went into suspended animation. Franklin concentrated to see if he could make his heart slow down. Suspended animation would be a good way to spend the weeks

he'd be grounded.

"How long am I going to be grounded this time?" he said.

Mom's head whipped around. "Your father and I have to talk about that, young man." She turned to Dad. "How much do you think it will cost to get their house cleaned up?"

Dad whistled. "It's not the cleaning I'm worried about. They might have to tear into some walls. Or that ceiling downstairs. New drywall maybe, paint.... It's going to take a while. Expensive too."

"But how much? Hundreds?"

Dad didn't say anything.

"Thousands?"

Dad shrugged.

Mom's head rested back against the top of the seat. "You've really done it this time, Franklin."

He couldn't find suspended animation.

Headlights from oncoming cars whizzed past and a few of them passed in time with the beat of his heart. He tried hiccupping to see if that would make his heart beat in time with the passing cars. It didn't work.

Finally Dad pulled the station wagon into their driveway.

"I'll get it," Perfect Roger said, and Franklin thought he offered to open the garage door just to get away from him.

Roger hopped out and slammed the car door closed, and walked into the brightness of the station wagon's headlights to lift the garage door.

Franklin missed the boy Roger used to be.

When Franklin was little, Roger didn't hate him. They used to wrestle on the front lawn, and sometimes Roger would pretend Franklin could beat him even though they both knew it was impossible. Roger used to call him Frankie in those days, not hypo.

Perfect Roger heaved the wide garage door up, and Franklin imagined it was a giant monster's mouth. He unbuckled his seatbelt. If it became a giant monster's mouth, he would have to be ready to jump out to fight the monster. Saving Roger would surely get him out of trouble. And maybe it would get Roger to stop hating him so much.

But the garage door didn't try to get a perfect snack. Roger just walked through the garage and disappeared into the house. He probably had to call Vicalyn. It had been at least an hour since he saw her. How had he even survived?

Dad drove the car into the monster's mouth. Franklin leaned across Mae to see if any teeth were up there.

It was only the wood frame of the yawning door.

He sure wished something exciting would happen.

Dad turned off the engine, and Mae sat there as if she expected someone to help her out, like Scarlett needing a gentleman to help her down from a buggy. When no one showed, she put the back of her hand to her forehead and sighed, and got out.

Franklin unbuckled and crawled onto the seat where Roger had been sitting. It was still

perfectly warm. He turned and got on his hands and knees and somersaulted out Mae's door after her.

He landed on his butt on the concrete floor.

"Up you go," Dad said, and waved Franklin inside.

Their Cocker Spaniel met Franklin when he ran into the house. Her name was Libby and she had as much energy as Franklin. She bounced up on her hind legs and pawed at him, her mouth open. She was always glad to see him, no matter what he'd done.

He ruffled her fluffy ears and knelt down to hug her.

As Libby licked all over his face, Franklin looked down the hall into the family room. The cord of the phone mounted on the wall disappeared into the closet next to it. That meant Roger had taken the receiver into the closet to make his perfect phone call to Vicalyn.

Dad came up behind Franklin. "Come on, son," he said.

Franklin told Libby, "Sorry, can't wrestle now," and bounded up the stairs. The trundling thumps behind him told him Libby was following.

Mom was in his room. She had a handful of his comics and was looking for more.

This was going to be worse than he thought.

"I don't even get to read my comics?"

"No. No comics. No TV. No friends. No fun, young man." She had the Supermans in a pile in her hands. "You just sit here and think about the damage you've done." She went to his Batman stash. "I want you in bed in ten minutes with your teeth brushed. Then it's lights out."

"But it's only seven o'clock."

She scowled at him. "Don't," she said. "Just don't." There was the vein, bluer than ever. It was like a pulsing blue worm trying to wiggle out from under the skin.

In the doorway she looked at the stack of comics in her hands. "Maybe we can sell these to help pay for the Beasleys' repairs."

Sometimes she said things like that. She wouldn't do it. Would she?

But this was bad. The worst ever. A record. The others didn't really cause any damage. Sometimes people got mad, like after the potato incident when the neighbors had to pry the potatoes out of their cars' tailpipes. And Mom really didn't like it when he oiled the flue in the fireplace so it kept closing, making the house like foggy London-town. At least letting the mouse loose in church made people laugh. Even Pastor Will.

Nobody was laughing this time.

Franklin looked down at Libby. She whined a little.

Dad passed Mom in the hallway and came into the room. "Go ahead and brush your teeth, pal," he said. "Let's get you in bed."

In the bathroom Dad's reflection smiled down from the mirror. People said Franklin looked like Dad, and Franklin saw something in Dad's eyes that made him think of his own. They were the same brown color. And Dad's chin had Franklin's kind of roundness in front. Dad told him once that when he was a boy his hair was blond like Franklin's, but now it was brown, with white like feathers over the ears.

Franklin liked the idea of his hair changing colors and wondered if it happened all at once.

Emily Beasley would be surprised if he showed up at school with brown hair tomorrow.

Dad laid out the PJs for him.

All the best superheroes had brown hair or black hair. He couldn't think of any with blond hair. There was Ace in Jonny Quest. But he wasn't quite a superhero.

Franklin's bed was much bouncier than the car seat. But he couldn't go in a circle. Only up and down. Libby jumped up next to him and rode the trampoline he was making.

Dad put his hands on Franklin's shoulders. There were wrinkles like spider-legs at the corners of Dad's eyes when he smiled. Franklin tried to imagine the eyes like spiders crawling off Dad's face, but that got a little scary.

"Dad? How long am I grounded for?"

Dad took a breath. "Well, the Beasleys' house was pretty bad. What made you unplug the pipe from the toilet tank, Frankie? It wasn't funny."

"I didn't know it was going to be so bad. I know I shouldn't have done it."

"Right. Good you take responsibility for it. But that hurt our friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Beasley, and that's the worst thing about it. Friendships are important."

Franklin hadn't thought about that. Painters and carpenters can fix houses, but not friendships. "Oh. Yeah."

"I know it's hard for you sometimes. You've got a lot of energy and a great imagination, pal."

His feet bounced on the floor, and he watched the calm movements of Dad's hands and feet.

Why didn't anybody else have to move all the time? Why was he the only one like this?

"I'm sorry, Dad."

Dad hugged him, and the smoky fragrance of Dad's shirt and the sandpapery rub of his neck made Franklin hold on.

"We'll talk more tomorrow, Frankie." Dad patted his back and Franklin let go of him.

Franklin yanked back the covers and Libby jumped down. He dove under the covers head first. He didn't want to see Dad switch off the light. He squirmed down to put his head where his feet usually went.

Bedtime at seven-ten.

No comics. No superheroes.

No cartoons, no western reruns.

No friends.

This was going to be a long week.

Two

Pastor Will was a husky man with a big, oblong head. He filled up the doorway to Franklin's room top to bottom, and then stepped in like a truck edging into a warehouse.

"Well, young man," he said with the voice of a rumbling engine, "I understand you're considering a future in the plumbing field."

Franklin didn't like the idea of other people confessing his sins for him. He tapped his feet on the floor at the foot of his bed. "Are you here to make me stop playing jokes on people?"

"Nobody can make you do anything, Frankie." Pastor Will leaned against the wall. The wall held up.

"Are the Beasleys still mad at me?" Franklin said.

"Maybe you can find out sometime. After a few weeks."

"I can ask Emily on Sunday."

A smile edged onto Pastor Will's mouth. "I wouldn't worry too much about Emily." Pastor Will always knew how to make Franklin feel better. If her parents were mad at him, that was one thing, but having Emily mad at him would be different.

Franklin noticed the book cradled in Pastor Will's hand. "That's a funny looking Bible."

He lifted it, his big-knuckled hand wrapped around the binding. "It's...a different book." A leather cord attached at the top of the book slipped between his fingers and at the end dangled a white, cut stone as long as Franklin's pinkie.

Pastor Will came away from the wall without leaving a dent in it. "Do you believe in miracles, Frankie?"

The springs on the bed squeaked with Franklin's bouncing. "You mean like Jesus stopping the storm, or making sick people better? Stuff like that?"

"Yeah. Stuff like that."

"Sure, why not? A guy makes something, he can change it around if he wants to."

Pastor Will smiled all the way now. "That's a good way of thinking about it." He worked his mouth like he was stopping some words from sneaking out. He cleared his throat, but didn't say anything more.

"So is that book for me?" Franklin said.

"If you want it."

"What's it about?"

He folded one arm under the other elbow, holding the book out before his face. "That's a hard question to answer, young man. I guess I'd just say it's the kind of book you have to figure out for yourself."

“But it’s got miracles in it?”

Pastor Will’s eyes crinkled up. “Oh, yes. It’s got miracles in it all right.”

He held it out, and the leather cord swung low. The cut stone flipped at the end of the cord, and in a white flash the stone reflected sunlight from the window against Pastor Will’s face.

Franklin reached out for it. But Pastor Will didn’t let it go. They stood there with the book between them.

Franklin looked up at him. The pastor’s big face was set harder than it had been before.

Pastor Will said, “If you take it, Frankie, you must not lose it. That is very important. Do you understand?”

The book suddenly seemed to weigh more, even though Pastor Will hadn’t let go of it yet.

Franklin nodded.

Pastor Will’s face softened, and he released the book.

Franklin held it in one hand and he held the stone in the other. The stone was cut narrow and long like a key, and a single groove ran from end to end. It was white, with colored lines like threads sunk into it.

He unclipped the cord from the top of the book’s binding. It looked familiar. “Hey, Roger’s got one of these.”

“Does he?”

“Yeah, he wears it like a necklace.”

“Ah.” Pastor Will’s mouth worked again, lips pressed together.

“Did you give Roger his too?” Franklin asked.

A wrinkle showed up in Pastor Will’s wide forehead. Then it was gone. He just nodded.

“Does he have a book like this too?” Franklin said.

Pastor Will looked at him. Something in Pastor Will’s eyes made Franklin go quiet inside.

“That book is just for you, Frankie,” he said.

Franklin rubbed the leather cover. It felt like an old baseball mitt.

“Well, I’d better be going,” Pastor Will said. “Lots to do today.” He stood up straight and held out his hand to shake, big enough to wrap up five or six hands the size of Franklin’s.

“Plumbing is a noble field, Frankie.” He held onto Franklin’s hand. “But you’re destined for other things.”

Pastor Will turned and filled up the doorway, and Franklin thought he could hear him chuckling on the way to the stairs.

Miracles in the book. Franklin coiled the leather cord around his hand until the stony key rested in his palm.

He liked to read the last paragraph of a book before anything else, so he turned to the end. The very last page was blank, but Franklin knew that sometimes they put blank pages at the end, so he flipped forward. More blank pages. He fanned the pages and made wind in his face. They were all blank until he came to the very front. Here was writing, but it wasn’t printed. The words were hand written in a cursive different from anything he’d seen before.

The key is a crossroad, the book is a door,

*His wonders to behold.
Your destiny, Franklin, is something more
Than tricks and games and gold.
Uwdian magic is miracles true,
Uwdian wonders await.
The King of all kingdoms now calls to you.
Come and discover your fate.*

Where was the story with miracles in it? The only thing here was this one poem. Franklin closed the book and shoved it under his arm. He lifted his hand and let the cord unravel.

Hanging from the cord, the key that the poem said was a crossroad dangled and spun, coming to rest before Franklin's eyes. He fingered it. Tiny lines of ruby red traced through the white marbly stone.

Roger wore his like a necklace.

Franklin lifted the cord over his head. The crossroad key dropped heavy to his chest. Franklin opened the book and recited the words written in the strange script.

“The key is a—”

He stopped and stared.

The letters had changed color on the page as he spoke them.

Franklin pressed his eyelids together and shook his head. Had he really seen that? They'd changed from black to orange, and warped bigger, first to last as he'd read them. Or did he imagine it?

The first letter of the next line pulsed black and orange on the page, growing and shrinking.

He jumped off the bed and ran to his window. But Pastor Will's truck was gone.

Something on his chest grew hot. The key.

He held it out before his face. It glowed clear white, and it was hot as a cookie just out of the oven. He couldn't hold onto it. He let it drop back to his chest and leaped back to his bed.

“The key is a crossroad, the book is a door...”

Franklin felt himself growing lighter, or the bed moving away from underneath him.

His heart went wild.

He read the coloring words. “His wonders to behold. Your destiny, Franklin, is something more than tricks and games and gold.”

He was off the bed. He sat in the air.

“Wow! ‘Uwdian magic is miracles true, Uwdian wonders await.’ The King of all kingdoms now calls to me. Here I come to discover my fate!”

His room vanished in a wash of brightness, as fast as darkness flees when you switch on a light.