

THE STARBURST JUJU

Dad looked stunned. “I can’t believe it. They found us.”

Mom’s trembling hands grabbed mine, and I met her eyes in reflexive pleading for some reassurance. I found none. I’d never seen her so terrified.

“Who found us?” I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

Loud howling came from outside, although I wasn’t sure I could call it howling. It was more like metal screaming out as it was being shredded. The hair on my arms rose. The howling noise intensified until it was right outside our kitchen, like it was pounding on our door. Slowly, but deliberately, we backed away. The howling stopped.

It was now eerily silent outside.

My heart thumping too loud in my ears, I whispered, “Dad, what’s out there?”

Before Dad could answer, something massive crashed through the roof, splintering to pieces. Fragments of splintered wood fell all around us; the debris blinded me for a second, agony in pain exploded in my shoulder when a large chunk of the roof struck my arm. Mom and I screamed as we looked at each other. My arm throbbed in agony.

Two huge maddocks crept in; their scent, like wet dog, was suffocating. In seconds, I’d seen a million times on TV, but nothing could have prepared me for the real thing. With bodies more like bears and large snouts curled and bared gleaming canine teeth. The hairy creatures stood upright like humans, so they towered over us. Muscles bulged under their dark fur. Their eyes were large, green and glowing. They moved in a mechanical way, like programmed robots. One of them grabbed Dad

while the other tore my screaming mother from my grasp, dragging them both out the broken door.

“Pepper, Run!” Dad shouted.

My heart pounding, I quickly looked around the kitchen. With my good arm, I grabbed the first thing I saw, the toaster, and yanked it out of the socket. I cried out in pain as the cord sprouted on my hand before I could even drop it. It was still hot from heating the waffle. I blinked back tears and took one of my large knives out of a drawer. My burnt hand tried to reuse my grip on it, but I pushed through the pain and threw it at the closest Maddock. The back end of the knife bumped its arm and fell lamely to the floor. The disgusting creature didn’t even notice.

“Pepper, please! Dad yelled. Just run!”

I ignored the pleading look on his face and snatched another knife, panicking when I realized it was only a tiny paring blade. It would have to do. I chucked it at the same Maddock, and a series of screams from the beast as the sharp edge sank into its back. A small fraction of a smile slid across my face as I got air.

The alien turned around slowly, noticing me for the first time. It roared furiously, its glowing eyes turning dark.

Oh crap, who was I thinking? I cowered behind the kitchen table, ducking under it to hide my stomach lurch as I tried not to throw up. I watched as Dad thrashed around violently to get free, but the Maddock holding him struck him once on the head.

His body went limp and was dragged out the door.

“Dad!” I leapt up from behind the table, feeling faint from the sudden movement. Mom flailed as the other monster tried to yank her outside. She tugged off her

