

The **TRUTH** about
MARTIANS
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Chicken
House

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For Tobin.
No one braver.



1. *The Crash*

4 July 1947 - 11.53 p.m.

In a fiery blaze.

That's how they show themselves for the very first time.

It's not like a Martian invasion is the first thing I think of when I see it, because I'm not crazy.

But it's *definitely* the second.

Not because I'm crazy, though. It's because that's exactly how Superman arrived.

In a fiery blaze.

His parents, Jor-El and Lara, sent him to Earth in a little space vessel to escape the annihilation of the planet Krypton.

You could say I'm sort of a Superman expert.

Well, both me and my best friend, Dibs, are. Except he's got this weird obsession with Martians, too. Mostly the Planet Comics series. It's his favourite, even over Superman.

Which is why Martians are the second thing I think of.

Because it's all he talks about some days. Martians this

and Martians that. It's hard not to think of them even when you're trying not to because he's always jabbering on about them.

Whatever it is that I'm seeing now streaks a blaze of fire through the black, thrashing thunderclouds on the hottest night of the summer in the middle of a monsoon and turns the small town of Corona, New Mexico, into a real-life comic book. The only difference is that no one's shouting *This looks like a job for Superman!* And Kal-El, the Last Son of Krypton, is a no-show.

It's just me.

Myló Affinito.

And I'm no superhero. Not even close.

Neither is Dibs, who sleeps through the whole thing.

'Dibs!' I whisper. 'You see that?'

He's sucking his middle knuckle and snoring so loud it sounds like he's sawing logs. 'Dibs!'

That kid wouldn't wake up if the vessel landed on the roof and Superman himself stepped out and started dancing a jig to 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy'.

Downstairs the baby is too busy crying and Momma too busy rocking and hushing in the creaky chair to notice any difference between that fiery flash of light and plain old lightning.

But I do.

I mean, I think I do . . . it just happened so fast.

Baby Kay doesn't like summer monsoons. Especially the loud ones. The ones that crash and crack and light up the night-time sky in an angry battle of cloudy wills. I think

maybe in her tiny brain she thinks if she wails the loudest she'll win and send all the clapping thunderclouds running. At least that's what it seems like, because she can howl real good sometimes.

It's when the brilliant flash of light dashes a second time across the bedroom ceiling from one corner to the other in less than one blink that I sit straight up. It's a flash so bright and so fast that it makes me wonder if I really saw anything at all.

Dibs and I are in my bed lying toes to nose, sweating under a single white sheet even though there's another perfectly good bed sitting on the other side of the bedside table. Which he reminds me of just about every single time he sleeps over. And that's a lot of nights since his momma left.

The bed on the other side of the bedside table with the blue quilt pulled straight and tight stays empty, though.

Empty for one year, one month, and eight days.

I look down at Dibs, watching him saw logs loud and steady. His mouth wide open now, sucking air in and out like the sky hasn't just caught fire for a moment. His face peaceful and totally unaware of his impending doom.

A dirty-foot-in-the-face alarm clock.

And since he doesn't see it coming, I get him real good, too. This time with my toes rubbed up right under his nose.

He sits straight up.

'Aw, that's just foul!' he cries.

'How could you sleep through all that?' I whisper.

'Through what?' He holds his hand up to his nose. 'Don't you ever wash them things?'

'You only missed the whole thing,' I tell him.

'The scum under your toenails?' He sticks his index finger inside his left nose hole, knuckle-deep. 'Seen it. And smelt it, too. You shoved your pinky toe in, you know. *In.*'

I stretch my neck to get a better look out of the window as Grammy Hildago's old lace curtains billow in the wind like two white ghosts scrambling in from the rain.

Momma and Daddy took over Grammy and Pappy Hildago's ranch five years ago after Pappy Hildago died. Daddy left the Army Air Force and we moved to New Mexico from the Bronx, where he grew up. I was six and Obie was eight and Baby Kay wasn't even born yet. But I hardly remember life before Corona.

'It was like the sky turned to daytime and back to night again in a single blink,' I whisper down at Dibs.

He's not even listening to me, holding one nose hole closed and snuffing in and out of the other. 'I hope you're happy, because that funk is probably stuck up in my nose hairs for life.'

'Dibs!' I sit up. 'I'm trying to tell you something important here.'

'About the light?'

'Yeah,' I say.

He hoists himself up on one pointy elbow and holds his head in his hand, blinking at me. 'What's the big deal about lightning?'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you,' I say. 'I don't think that's what it was. At least it didn't look like lightning. It looked like . . . like the sky caught fire or something.'

'So . . . lightning.'

'I told you it wasn't, didn't I?'

He yawns a long, bored yawn. 'If it wasn't lightning, then what was it?' he asks.

'That's the question,' I tell him.

He clicks his tongue at me, rolls his eyes real big, and flops back down on the bed. 'Good night,' he tells me, sliding a flat pillow with a yellowing case over his head. 'And if I get another toe in the snoot, you're going to get this knuckle sandwich right in the kisser.' He pushes a single skinny fist out from under the pillow.

I snort at that one and hear his muffled giggle against the mattress.

That's because we both well know that his sandwiches couldn't make a dent in *anyone's* kisser. Knuckle or otherwise. He's a skeleton with the skin still on and he knows it, too.

And then another fiery streak lights up the room, this time with a whooshing noise that sounds like it's blowing the green shutters clear off the windows as it blazes on by.

I know he sees something this time, too, because his head pops straight up from underneath the pillow. Baby Kay howls her loudest wail yet. And I rush to the window, clinging to the wet sill with wide eyes peering out into the blackness.

Sloppy raindrops soak the cows soggy out in the field and pummel the roof of the front porch and the barn, too. Small lakes form in the dirt drive and the large drops drench the chicken coop and Daddy's tractor parked out front.

'What is it?' Dibs asks, holding the sheet tight under his chin like a threadbare protective shield. 'What do you see out

there? Is it Martians? It is, isn't it? Martians landing to take over the planet. Just like a real live *War of the Worlds*. It is, isn't it?

'Why don't you just come over here and look for yourself?' I say.

'I'm not going anywhere until I know for sure there isn't any Martian out there waiting to beam me up to the mother ship,' he says. 'You check first.'

'I'm not your Martian checker.'

'You know they'll harvest your brains out your ears as soon as look at you,' he goes on. 'That's how they are.'

I blow air out of my mouth. 'You read way too many comic books,' I say.

'On *The Whistler* last week,' he goes on, 'they had a whole episode about this guy who was abducted by Martians and they probed his brain and he became a mindless, soulless shell of a human to further the Martian agenda here on Earth and no one even knew it because he still kept his same human form.'

I scoff. '*Probed his brain?*'

He looks at me real serious. 'Yep, Martian mind control.'

I shake my head at him but he carries on anyway, just like he does when he blabs on with his Martian stories.

'Maybe they already probed 'em and we don't know it because they already took our brains for experimentation and they're gone now,' he says.

I turn to face him. 'Maybe yours is.' I smile.

He smiles back at me with his big beaver teeth that don't all fit in his mouth yet. 'Well, they do tend to prefer geniuses.'

He puts his chin in the air and puffs his skinny chest out.

'Will you stop being a chicken and just get over here already?' I order, pointing at the floor next to me.

He sighs heavy and slides his leathery bare feet across the worn floorboards until he's kneeling on his knobby knees right beside me. His feet are tougher than the finest leathers in all the land on account of never wearing boots. He says they pinch his toes, but I think it's really because he doesn't have ones that fit him right. Not since his momma left him and Mr Butte two summers ago.

We stare out of the window together, leaning against the sill, chins resting on our forearms.

Waiting.

Mist from the heavy drops sprays into our eyes and sprinkles our skin, cooling us from the sweltering night. The rusted-up tin windmill out past the chicken coop gripes a high-pitched metal wail, complaining to the wind for pushing it around. My heartbeat pounds in my ears and Dibs's heavy breaths are short and fast, going in and out of his bony chest.

'Maybe,' he finally whispers after a good long while. 'It was a ghostly spirit from . . . H-E-L-L. I heard this story one time about an evil demon stuck in Purgatory who blasted right out and snatched this kid down in Albuquerque and they never seen him again. Not ever. Stole his soul right out from under him. You *know* something like that's got to be true. People don't make that stuff up. You believe in ghosts, Mylo?'

I shrug. 'Depends,' I say.

'How about Martians?' he asks. 'You believe in them?'
This time I don't answer.

Things to know about Dibson Tiberius Butte:

- 1. The only things bigger than his tall tales are his beaver teeth and those ears.*
- 2. His toes stink way worse than mine no matter what he says.*
- 3. He's my very best friend in the whole entire universe.*

We wait.

Thunder rolls.

Lightning flashes.

Downstairs, Baby Kay is finally quieting and the creaking of Momma's chair is slowing.

And then in a single second comes the loudest thunder-clap I've ever heard. It shakes the earth and shatters the desert silence. It's a clap so loud it sounds like it cracked a million-mile crater deep into the centre of the whole wide world, and that's when we see a colossal explosion, out in the direction of Foster Ranch. The blast sprays brilliant bits of fire out in a dazzling burst of light towards the heavens.

When I see all that, I duck under the windowsill and Dibs scrambles for cover in the bed under the safety of his sweaty white shield.

'Did you see that?' he says from behind his cotton armour.
'Did you?'

'Yeah,' I say, peeking back up over the sill.

'That' - Dibs points a single skinny finger out from under the sheet - 'wasn't lightning.'

I roll my eyes at him. 'Didn't I tell you so?'

I watch in amazement as the explosion turns to small specks of light spraying back towards the earth. It's like the fireworks display we saw earlier tonight at the Fourth of July parade in town, but instead of bits of light bursting up high and then falling down, this explosion happens on the ground and shoots straight up in a blazing bouquet.

'Think it's Martians?' Dibs peeks one eye out.

'Nah,' I say. 'Has to be something else. Maybe someone just goofing around with leftover firecrackers.'

'*Firecrackers?* He gives me a look. 'Are you kidding me?'

A cow out in a nearby pasture moans.

Another one answers her.

'Even the cows are talking about it,' Dibs tells me.

I watch the lights in silence for a long while, seeing the fiery bits burn out in slow motion towards the ground until it's almost all dark again.

'One of us better go and check things out,' Dibs says. 'And when you do . . . make sure and tell 'em you come in peace.'

I snort again and point a thumb out towards the field. 'You're off your rocker if you think I'm going out there,' I inform him.

'Well, *I'm* sure not doing it.'

I watch the light storm until each of the fiery flickers goes mostly all dark and the desert and the ranch and all the fields around us grow quiet again.