

Deleted Scenes from Thunderstone

By Barbara Pietron

Thunderstone is available at Amazon.com and BN.com

If you've read Thunderstone, then you know the underwater monster extended his malevolent intentions onto land by recruiting an evil minion. Who was this guy? Mishebeshu called him *Gushkewau'*, meaning *darkness*. His name however, is Ned and he has his own story. The following scenes were deleted from the original Thunderstone manuscript to elevate the "creepiness" factor by not knowing this guy or what he might be capable of. But Ned was quite busy in the background; stealing, deceiving, evading, and plotting his own revenge.



"...well-written and entertaining...Jeni makes for a likeable protagonist that readers will identify with," – Publishers Weekly

- See more at: <http://scribe-publishing.com/thunderstone/#sthash.t8VyhqKz.dpuf>

Deleted Scene 1: The Making of a Minion

Although his head was on the floor, Ned felt grateful for the cool surface where his face rested. He opened his eyes. Two shot glasses sat on the floor in front of his nose. Further down, he identified a couple of cardboard coasters. His forehead creased and he squinted.

One shot glass. One coaster.

As cognizance seeped into the rest of his body, he realized he was sitting. On a stool. If that was so, he reasoned, then his head could not be on the floor. Probing his alcohol addled brain; Ned eventually concluded that the side of his face was pressed on the bar.

"Closing time."

Gingerly, he lifted his head. A string of saliva extended from the corner of his mouth to a puddle of drool on the bar surface. He lifted his arm and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. Damn, he'd missed last call.

"Time to go, buddy." The bartender cleared the shot glass and coaster as he wiped down the bar. "Need me to call you a taxi?"

"Nah, slept it off." The words slurred slightly around his thick tongue. He waited until the bartender's back was turned to slip off the stool with both hands braced on the edge of the bar for stability. When he felt somewhat steady on his feet, he turned to the door, gave a little push off the bar, and shuffled forward. No way in heck was he spending money on a cab.

The chairs were arranged upside-down on the table tops giving him a clear shot and he actually made it across the room without stumbling into something. He leaned against the door frame, then pulled the door open and lurched out into the darkness. Ned fumbled around in his pockets and groaned when he came up empty handed. Some a-hole in the bar must've pick-pocketed his keys and taken his car.

The thought was immediately contested when his blurry vision fell on his car still in the lot.

With a snort of derision, he contemplated that the pick-pocket was not only an a-hole, but also an idiot. He pulled the door handle on the driver's side and when it swung open he climbed inside. Though he couldn't go anywhere, at least he had a place to rest his head and close his eyes. College kids probably lost their keys all the time, he mused. Not that he'd know. But if he'd done his drinking in college—if he had gone to college—he'd probably have friends to call when he couldn't find his car keys.

Suddenly he jerked forward and slammed his fist on the dash. "It ain't fair," he mumbled, slumping until his forehead rested on the steering wheel. His vision focused and he stared at keys hanging from the ignition. Comprehension took a moment, then he barked out a bitter laugh. "Backwoods folk don't even know to steal something when it's right in front of them!"

The starter churned for a few seconds before the engine roared to life. With a grim smile, Ned jammed his foot down on the gas pedal leaving a cloud of dust behind him as he rolled onto blacktop. He needed to get back on US 2 toward Duluth. Though he didn't

have another lead yet, someone was sure to have noticed his bitch of a wife or at least her shiny red Mustang.

US 2 was a straight shot north. In his muddled state, he inadvertently headed south. He missed the sign for Highway 200 as well as the brown and white sign for Itasca State Park. Flying through the stop sign at the intersection of Highway 200, Ned slammed on the brakes and skidded sideways. His left fender halted inches from the large entrance sign for the state park. Frowning, he studied the park sign and then looked both ways on Highway 200. With a shrug, he floored the gas pedal and sped off east, tires spitting gravel.

Next thing he knew, he was crumpled on cold, damp ground. Moaning, he rolled to his back and stared at trees silhouetted against the night sky. *Where the heck was he and how did he get here?* All that came to mind was the sign: Itasca State Park. He raised his head and cried out when throbbing pain skewered his eyeballs. The smell of decaying leaves assaulted his nose and his stomach churned. He rolled onto his hands and knees and puked his guts up then crawled a short distance away and collapsed. When he felt he could bear to move again, he slowly lifted his torso until he rested on his forearms so he could look around.

Son of a B! His car was smashed into a tree. How would he follow Honey now? It wasn't fair. She'd stolen everything from him—his youth, education, chance for success—and to top it off, ripped his heart out. He wanted to make her pay; make her life suck for a change.

Bolstered by anger, Ned crawled to the nearest tree and dragged himself to his feet. He'd never have his revenge if he got arrested for drunk driving. Lurching from tree to tree, he made his way into the forest. As he trudged, the woods compacted, becoming difficult to navigate. Then he noticed large mounds covered only with low brush. Making his way to what Ned assumed was an easier path; he soon decided fighting through the trees would be easier than struggling uphill. At the top of a mound he sank to his knees, heaving in the loam scented air. "I'll get my revenge," he mumbled, hands balled into fists, "even if it kills me."

Suddenly a new sensation filled his mind, muting the throbbing pain. He thought it was a sense of purpose, and welcomed the relief; embraced the numbness. Alarm started to bud as the odd feeling weaved its way through around his thoughts, but it was too late for caution. He sensed a presence. Something—someone—was inside of him.

"You seek vengeance."

"Who are you?" He spoke out loud, attempting to sound intimidating, but his voice gurgled over his inflamed throat and instead he just sounded weak.

"I am ancient history—legend, myth, nightmare. And like you, I have a score to settle. I have need of mortal assistance. Perhaps we can help each other."

Ned's eyebrows lifted. "How can you help me?"

"I see much. I know whom you seek and where she can be found."

Ned's clouded mind fought to reconcile the ramification of the words. If the claim was valid, he wanted in. But at what price? "What do you need me to do?"

"Earth-bound labor."

Labor? Ned snorted. He worked on the docks. Physical work was his life. "How do I know you can do what you say?"

Suddenly, the forest around him grew lighter, as if dawn had been forced into the sky.

"What is that?"

"I've enhanced your vision so you can see at night."

Ned's eyes grew large and he swiveled his head slowly from one side to the other, scanning the details of the surrounding woods. He was impressed.

"That's not the extent of my gift. You've become part of the darkness; this is why its secrets are no longer hidden from you. This also means you can blend with the darkness; move undetected."

Ned's mouth twisted into an ugly smile. Move undetected, now that was a true advantage. "So, if I do what you ask, you'll tell me where Honey is?"

"I will."

Ned took only a moment before he answered. This being obviously had power. His car was wrecked; this was his only chance to find Honey now. Besides, he had nothing to lose. "How do I contact you?"

"Contact is made here—on the mounds. This is a sacred place."

A sacred forest? Where had he crashed his car? Whatever. It didn't really concern him. "Do you have a name?"

A pause stretched out and Ned shifted his weight from foot to foot. Finally the answer came: *"You can call me Manitou."*

"I'm Ned."

"You are Gushkewau': Darkness."

Ned lifted an eyebrow, but decided he didn't give a rat's ass what he was called as long as he got his revenge on Honey. The voice in his head issued instructions and he struck off down the hill and through the trees. Soon, the occasional rises in the terrain afforded a view of a lake in the distance. As he drew closer to the water, the land leveled out and, with his attention on the horizon, he stumbled and fell on his hands and knees in the damp leaves. He swore and sat back on his feet, brushing his hands together to rid them of debris.

With his enhanced vision, he instantly noticed the area was sparsely populated with small trees and brush though still surrounded by the forest of huge, ancient trees. He didn't need a college degree to deduce that the land had once been cleared. His gaze travelled the clearing's periphery and paused on a strange shape in the foliage on his right. He rose to examine the anomaly. The somewhat triangular structure stood a few feet taller than his six foot frame. Closer inspection revealed stone beneath the growth of vines and moss. Ned used the toe of his boot to poke along the bottom edge and when he felt the brush give way across the structure's center section, he was sure he'd found an old fireplace and chimney.

Turning, he scanned the rotting logs—too uniform to be downed trees—and was sure he'd found the remains of a cabin. Could it be the place Manitou spoke of? The voice said the structure would be old. A quick survey of the surrounding area didn't produce any site as promising as the first. But there was one important detail he had yet to locate.

Ned shuffled around in what he could make out as the center of the scattered logs, then methodically worked his way across the small area, occasionally thumping the ground with a foot. About seven feet from the chimney, a hollow sound replaced the previous dull thuds.

With a self-satisfied smile forming at the corners of his mouth, he stomped in each direction until he had a rough estimation of the size of the hollowness below and then used his heel to trace an outline through the leaves and dirt. A quick foray into the forest produced a sturdy branch which Ned used to dig up the earth inside the borders of his outline.

A couple inches below the dirt, he found the flat surface he sought and began scraping the branch across it to reveal the boundaries of the opening to the earth below. Nearly half-way around, the branch caught-up in mid scrape. He doubled his efforts around the obstacle and was rewarded with the discovery of an iron ring, still connected to the trap door below.

His lips drew back into a smirk.

Now his work concentrated on unearthing the edges of the door. As dawn crept over the horizon, Ned finally grasped the ring and jerked upward, breaking the door free of any remaining debris. "Ugh!" he exclaimed, scrunching up his face and turning to the side as stale air assaulted his nostrils. Holding his breath, he hauled the door completely open and stepped back, letting the space below breathe in the fresh air.

While contemplating the ancient cellar, Ned put his hand to his head then stopped short of brushing his fingers through his close-cropped hair. His scalp was sticky with blood. A quick glance through the trees reminded him how close he was to the lake. He was exhausted, but cleaning up would give the musty hole a chance to breathe.

Pants legs rolled, he splashed water on his face and head. At first, his many cuts stung in protest, but soon the coldness of the water did away with the pain. Bending further, Ned dunked the top of his head into the water and lightly rubbed his scalp. When he straightened, he quickly shook his head, sending water droplets flying.

The sun slanted through the trees and Ned took a seat on a rock to give his feet a chance to dry. As the iciness of the water faded, weariness took its place. He donned his socks and shoes and returned to the cellar.

He noticed immediately that the space lacked steps or a ladder. He shrugged; it wasn't a problem as long as he could get the door open. Another search in the woods provided him with a long sapling. He stripped the small branches from it and tossed it inside the cellar. By sitting on the edge of the opening, he was able to haul the door up next to him. Then he quickly dropped inside, letting the door slam overhead.

Deleted Scene 2: Good Guy Goes Bad

It seemed Ned had just closed his eyes when the voice of Manitou roused him. He sat up in the dark cellar and listened to the urgent instructions. Minutes later, he strode through the woods and found the trail. A marker pointed him in the direction of the headwaters.

Pausing on the bridge to catch his breath, he searched upstream to see if anyone was in the water as Manitou had claimed. There. A teenage girl held the hand of a small child as they waded in the river. Crossing the bridge, Ned edged down the path, sticking to the shadows. His eyes followed the blonde teenager as she carried the little boy to a bench.

Manitou must've meant the boy—he gotten hurt.

Except the girl dried his little feet with a paper towel and put his shoes and socks back on. As soon as she was finished, the boy ran off. Ned frowned as he watched the girl dry her own feet. When she paused with the towel pressed to her ankle, he spied the bandage in her other hand.

Aha. She must be the one.

The girl then bent to apply the bandage as the breeze fluttered in her hair, catching the sun's highlights. Ned guessed she was about the same age Honey had been when he'd met her. But where this girl was pretty in a sexy, girl-next-door kind of way, Honey had been beauty-pageant gorgeous.

He remembered the day Honey had been assigned as his lab partner. Man, he thought he'd won the lotto. Everyone knew her; everyone wanted to be with her. He was doubly flabbergasted when she'd climbed on the stool next to him and said, "Hi, Ned". Honey knew his name? He didn't think she even knew he existed.

Looking back now, that should've been the first warning that things weren't right.

Although Ned was smart, almost assured a college scholarship, and on the way to a bright future as a chemical engineer, these were qualities Honey wouldn't have known nor cared about. What she would've known is that he was poor—and a geek—a far cry from the mayor's football captain son she'd just broken up with.

But she'd set her sights on Ned, and he'd been so enamored by her, he didn't figure out that she was intentionally slumming. In the beginning, she was probably out to piss off her ex-boyfriend, but what ultimately got her off was how much her father disliked Ned.

He'd been a pawn to get her daddy's attention.

"I don't care what daddy says, I love you," Honey said before she pulled her shirt over her head, carelessly dropping it to the floor of his car.

It was their fourth date, and he'd been taking it slow. He really liked her. But she slid across the seat and pressed herself against his chest, kissing him while she unbuckled his belt. At seventeen, he was pretty much defenseless.

Besides, she said she loved him, so it was okay, wasn't it?

Fast forward to a month before graduation. He reached across the bench seat of his banged up sedan, but she pushed him away, whipping up some tears. "I'm pregnant," Honey announced.

Ned drew back, eyes wide. "But I always use a condom. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I took a test. And condoms don't work all the time." She managed a few convincing sobs.

"What do you want to do?" Ned asked softly.

"I don't know—

Ned snapped back to the present as a teenage boy passed by on the path. He bent and pretended to tie his shoe. The blonde girl had joined a group of people standing in front of a sign for a picture. Brushing any residual dirt from his clothes, Ned emerged from the shadows. He followed the group up the path to the Headwaters Center, doing his best to eavesdrop on their conversations.

That they were a group of family members was apparent immediately. The girl's mother was unmistakable—they looked so much alike they could've been sisters. He noticed the woman glance occasionally in her daughter's direction, but otherwise respected her independence.

How nice that freedom must be.

Ned's single-parent mother was scared to death of her only son going off to college and leaving her alone, so when she learned of Honey's pregnancy, she used it to keep him nearby.

On the other side, Honey's father wanted her to abort the baby, which only made her determined to keep it. In love, Ned proposed, thinking they could live in married housing at the university.

Honey looked up at him with her big blue eyes. "I do want to marry you, Neddie, but we can't go away—I'll need help with the baby and we won't know anyone."

Oh, how his mother had pounced on that idea. "It's bad enough you went and got her pregnant, now you're going to take her away from all she knows too?"

Like an idiot, he'd acquiesced and turned down his scholarship offers. A month after the wedding, Honey claimed she miscarried.

Lost in his reminiscence, Ned realized he was trailing behind and picked up his pace a little so he could hear the conversation of the two women in front of him.

"....gift shop we saw on the way in."

"Me too. I'm not usually big on souvenir shopping, but this trip is different."

"I know what you mean, I bought a "Rainbow Resort" t-shirt yesterday but I'd like something related to the headwaters."

Bingo.

Ned strode past the women as they slowed at the Headwaters Center, turning away to hide his devilish grin.

Deleted Scene 3: On the Prowl

The rising moon was just a sliver. Though the night was clear, the moonlight did little to illuminate the field—ideal conditions for Ned to slip unnoticed into the farmyard. He slunk silently along the back of the barn and peered around the corner.

The yard was still. A soft, blue glow emanated from a window in the front of the farmhouse. At the back, the windows facing the barn were black obsidian. Most likely the kitchen was located in the rear of the house and dinner was long over for a farming family.

Ned breathed in the early summer smell of tilled ground as he crept alongside the barn and then stepped to the large front doors. Slowly and carefully he lifted the lever holding the doors closed. When the left side swung just wide enough, he slid through the opening. The dry, sweet aroma of hay greeted him, followed by the musky scent of horses. Though he knew the pitch black interior of the barn would necessitate light for most people to get around, Ned's cat-like vision allowed him to make out stalls, hay bales, saddles and other tack. Oh, and just what he was looking for—tools.

He padded to the pegboard wall and examined the various rakes, shovels, and cutters hanging from hooks. He stroked the handle of the scythe without removing it from the wall. That's not what he was here for. Instead he selected a large shovel. From a can on the nearby work bench he found a small trowel.

Tools in hand, he poked his head out the barn door. The breeze kicked up and Ned froze as he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. His eyes darted in that direction and then he grunted a low chuckle. Someone had left clothes hanging on a clothes line. He raised his eyebrows, considering the suspended garments, then slipped out of the barn and latched the door behind him. After a brief stop at the clothes line to do a little shopping, Ned made his way to the road. He dumped his items in some dry brush and continued with his next hunt.

Not far down the road he found a private drive. Four wooden signs nailed to the same tree pointed the way to summer homes and cottages which likely bordered a lake. The dirt road snaked into the dark woods, but Ned didn't need a flashlight and when he reached the first property, its floodlight seemed over bright. His gait barely slowed as he passed the small cottage—the place had no garage.

A small light on the porch of the next house glowed feebly in the darkness, shedding no light on the adjacent small garage. Ned drew his hand inside his sleeve to punch out the window in the garage's pedestrian door, then reached inside to work the lock. The smell of gas and motor oil that wafted out raised his hopes, although once inside, he could see the interior was nearly filled by a pleasure boat. Just to be sure, he gingerly picked his way over obstacles until he completed the circuit and arrived back at the door.

Negative.

The dirt track curved to follow the shore of the lake and Ned's gaze was immediately drawn to the next driveway lit by a flood light. Illuminated in the glow sat an empty trailer attached to an SUV. Closer inspection of the trailer's tie downs convinced him he could find what he sought here. But the attached garage had neither windows nor a pedestrian door. He yanked on the handle to the large door, confirming what he'd already assumed: it was locked.

There had to be a way. He was certain he'd find what he needed inside. There were only two ways into the garage—through the house or through the large door. Breaking into the house seemed unnecessarily risky. If the garage door had an electric opener he may be able to force it open, but it would probably make quite a bit of noise. His eyes shifted to the SUV and his right eyebrow inched up. It could work. He approached the front bumper and pushed down hard, allowing it to bounce back up before shoving it down again and again. When the alarm blared to life, he dashed out of the ring of light and stepped behind a tree.

Seconds later, buried beneath the screaming alarm, he heard an electric hum and creaking aluminum. Peeking around the tree trunk, Ned watched the door roll up on its track and reveal twin dirt bikes. A man stood in a t-shirt and boxers on the landing leading into the house, key fob in hand. He pointed it at the SUV. Once the deafening noise ceased, the man continued to study the driveway for a few moments. Then he shook his head and went back inside.

As soon as the garage door opener groaned into action, Ned darted into the garage and ducked behind a couple of garbage cans. Even when the automatic light cycled off, he waited. He'd let the household return to an unguarded atmosphere; maybe soon they would even go to bed. Time was on his side.

Deleted Scene 4: The Thrill of Victory

Ned dug the shovel into the earth and hoisted the load over his shoulder where it landed in the center of the cellar floor. "Quittin' time," he said. He scraped the dirt into the growing pile in the corner. Cracking open a water bottle, he slid slowly to the ground. In five gulps he'd consumed half the bottle and grunted with satisfaction.

Last night had been extremely successful, he reflected.

He'd used his time in the garage wisely. First he found the garage door opener button (mounted next to the door—a no-brainer). Then he inspected both cycles, choosing the one that was clearly newer. Stealthily, he turned the bike around so it faced out, checked the fuel level, and even found a gas can to top off the tank. As he familiarized himself with the bike's controls, a flash of bitter resentment burned in his stomach. His skills had been totally wasted when he worked for Honey's father. But wanting to make sure his future 'grandchild' was taken care of properly, he'd insisted that Ned work for him.

At the docks. What a frickin' waste.

That he made good money didn't really matter since Honey spent it as fast as it came in. Before he left he was able to withdraw one hundred and twenty dollars from the ATM. He was surprised there'd been any money left in the account.

But she always had plastic. And that was how he'd found where she'd stayed the first night. Her and her 'lay of the month'. Of course they were gone by the time he'd arrived at the hotel. Now the credit card company had been alerted not to give him any more information. The guy Honey was with must've thought of that—he couldn't imagine her having the idea.

He wasn't sure how he'd follow her after that, which is how he ended up wasted at that bar. But then he crashed and fate had seen fit to offer him help. His first reaction at Manitou's offer was reluctance to let her get farther away, but the being seemed confident of her whereabouts. Perhaps Honey and the a-hole had just shacked up somewhere, assuming he had no way to track them down.

My, my, they were in for a surprise.

He'd see to it that Honey suffered. But he'd do it behind the scenes. It would all look like a string of bad luck, accidents, and technical difficulties. Her life was going to suck big-time.

Last night in the garage he'd been smiling at the thought of how awful he would make Honey's life when he'd heard the man inside the house ascend the stairs. By that time, his exploration of the garage had turned up a case of water, a large box of granola bars, and a plastic canister of pretzels. He couldn't believe his good fortune. Again, fate smiled upon him. The family's membership to a warehouse club was purely bonus—he bundled up as much as he could and strapped it onto the back of the motorcycle.

He was ready to go.

Ned sat very still, his senses attuned to the house. After what he deemed to be enough time had passed without hearing a sound, he decided it was time to leave. A muffled rumble from the house made him stop in his tracks. The sound came again. And again. Suddenly Ned's face split into a grin. The dude was snoring; it was definitely time to go.

Next came the tricky part of his plan. He couldn't be in two places at the same time, so he had to hit the garage door button and then hop on the motorcycle and start it. His pulse quickened and adrenaline coursed through his body. He broke into a crooked smile, his finger poised on the button.

He jabbed with his finger and then leaped to the dirt bike and swung his leg over the seat, twisting the key in the ignition. The engine cranked and sputtered. He gave it a little gas and it roared to life. As soon as he attempted to shift, it stalled.

A manic laugh bubbled up, stimulated by the chance of getting caught. The door was open completely now and Ned repeated the same procedure except when the engine caught, he gunned it a few times, letting it warm up a bit. No use in trying to be quiet now. He whooped as he let out the clutch and gave it some gas. The machine jumped forward and shot down the dark road.

Ned grinned at the gray wall in front of him as he recalled the excitement of the ride back to the cellar. He stopped to pick up the other things he'd left near the farm. When he reached his destination, he tossed his supplies into the cellar and then stowed the dirt bike behind the stone chimney and covered it with brush. Still jazzed on adrenaline, Ned had munched a granola bar and then began digging the tunnel.

Tonight he had some spying to do and then he needed to go back out and find some kind of tarp to transport the dirt out of the tunnel as it got longer. Though it wouldn't compare to the thrill of taking the motorcycle, he still looked forward to sneaking around. After emptying the water bottle, Ned lounged against the small pile of dirt, and closed his eyes, a smile lingering at the corners of his mouth.

Seemed he was good at being bad. Who knew?

Deleted Scene 5: Surveillance

Ned stripped off all of his clothes and stood naked on the shore of the lake. The sun had retreated behind the trees, and the water glimmered black in the shadow of the forest. He strode purposely forward and at knee-depth, dove into the chilly water. When his head broke the surface, he gave it a quick shake then wiped the water from his face. He ran his hands over his arms and then behind his ears, shedding dirt and grime.

He rubbed his skin all over and then glided toward shore, chilled. Maybe tomorrow he'd go use the campground showers, but it wasn't worth the effort tonight; he was going back to work on the tunnel soon. He picked up the towel he'd snagged from the clothesline last night and vigorously scrubbed his skin dry. Then he donned the clean jeans and shirt he'd stolen. Not a bad fit.

He felt all right.

At the cellar, he cracked the trap door and slipped his dirty clothes inside. Then, clearing the brush from the dirt bike, he climbed on and headed for the main park drive. In this age of cell phones, pay phones with attached phone books were rare. He figured the park visitor center was a good place to start for information, and certainly nearer than a public library.

Fifteen minutes later he strode from the visitor center with a phone number and a hand-drawn map to Rainbow Resort. He'd poured on the charm and the woman was more than happy to help him. As he'd suspected, the resort was close by.

He switched the bike off as he turned into the drive designated by a roadside sign, and coasted down the gravel road. The sun was long gone from the sky and though open areas retained some visibility, shadows beneath the trees had reached out and joined together. He leaned the bike up against an unoccupied cottage and faded into the night, taking care to stay out of the pools of light shed by the resort's floodlights.

A bonfire immediately drew his attention as he prowled the grounds between the lake and cottages. A large oak tree provided a hidden spot to stop and let his eyes adjust while he studied the group surrounding the fire. As details became clear with his extraordinary night vision, Ned identified at least six women and two small kids. He'd found the right people.

A sound to his left made him instinctively take a step behind the tree he'd been leaning against. Two people strode past him and approached the fire. As the orange glow lit the two faces, Ned recognized the girl from the park. The guy she was with was new though—and definitely not family.

When they sat down on the swing together he guessed the boy must be her boyfriend. A couple of creases in Ned's forehead deepened as he watched the happy scene. What bothered him wasn't the couple on the swing, it was the kids. When Honey told him she was pregnant he'd been ecstatic. He wanted kids, a family—a normal life.

What kind of person lied about being pregnant?

A bitch.

Ned glowered at the scene. He'd found the right place. Maybe if everyone left tomorrow he could break in and search the cottage. His instructions were clear: the girl had something he needed to retrieve.

Deleted Scene 6: Freeing the Monster

Ned let out a whoop without noticing—or caring—how the confines of the cellar stifled the sound. He was through!

He'd been shoveling dirt onto the stolen tarp, dragging it to the cellar to dump it, and then repeating the process for hours. Unfortunately, progress meant every trip back and forth was a little longer. Just now however, his efforts had paid off.

Pulling the shovel from the hole he'd just punched through the back wall of the tunnel, Ned slid the tool behind him and grabbed the flashlight he'd picked up from the same campsite where he'd found the tarp. As he moved further into the tunnel, he'd found the complete blackness hard to fathom even with his enhanced vision. With his free hand, he cleared out the opening and rested the light against his cheek as he peered through the hole.

The small beam did little to reveal the entirety of the large chamber. He circuited the area with the light, noting the rock walls and possibly another opening on the opposite wall. His first impression was that the floor was lined in some smooth, shiny rock until he realized the black pool was water. His inspection revealed no signs of life.

As he stretched his neck to examine the surface below the hole, something moved. Ned jerked his head back instinctively and twitched the flashlight around the area. Just as he thought his imagination was getting the better of him, the surface of the water rippled. The sight of the churning, swirling inky liquid sent a cold worm of dread burrowing into his gut. He drew back from the hole.

His instructions were to enter the chamber and clear the way. But thoughts of what may lurk in the water made Ned reluctant to continue.

Revenge. He needed to keep his eye on the prize. To steel his resolve, he closed his eyes and let the scene he'd locked away play out in slow motion.

The side door of their house swung open and he stepped into the kitchen. Although everything looked normal, he could somehow feel the abandonment that had taken root in her absence. His shoes turned to lead and Ned hauled one foot in front of the other, making his way to their bedroom. Dead eyes gazed at the evidence of what his heart already knew. The closet door stood wide open, revealing minimal contents. Dresser drawers hung open, some empty, some containing only his clothes. On the vanity, dust surrounded clear areas where items had been removed.

He clutched at his heart and realized the truth of his feelings. Even though he knew about the lies and the cheating, he had still harbored a small kernel of hope that somehow things would turn around. No longer. Staring at the remnants of his marriage, his hope died. Although their relationship had never truly existed, for Ned it ended in that moment. Gathering the pain and humiliation, Ned transformed it into anger, emptied the bank account, and left without looking back.

He opened his eyes and summoned the fury from that day. Snatching the shovel from the ground, he jabbed at the hole until it was large enough to fit his body through. If death awaited him here, then so be it. Because if he didn't get his revenge, there'd be no pieces of himself to pick up and put back together. Getting even was the only way Ned could fathom to fix his shattered psyche.

His arms dove through the opening, followed by his head. Scrabbling his feet in the loose tunnel dirt and wriggling his torso, eventually allowed him to squirm through the hole and drop to the floor of the cavern. Momentum sent him sprawling toward the water, but he spread his arms wide and stopped inches from the water's edge.

The pool swelled, causing tiny waves that lapped gently at the shore. Ned slid backward until his back met the wall. He watched, wide-eyed, as a warm glow rose out of the black depths. Metallic horns broke the surface first, followed by eyes the size of plates with elliptically shaped pupils, and last, a scaled snout. The thought that filled Ned's head as he slowly retracted his feet and rose unsteadily was *dragon*.

The enormous head swung in his direction and he was caught in the creature's cat's-eye gaze. The cunning and intelligence with which Ned was regarded negated any thought of flight. He would not outsmart this beast.

A voice filled his head and shivered down his spine. "*What are you waiting for? Free me.*"

"Manitou?" Ned's voice croaked from his mouth. He swallowed hard around the lump in his throat. His assumption was that the being in his head had no earthly presence.

The creature shifted its formidable girth and pointed its nose at the wall opposite the hole Ned just crawled through. He raised the light that hung from his trembling hand and pointed it across the pool at the opening he'd noticed earlier. It appeared as though the passage was blocked. Edging slowly around the cavern, side-stepping, and never taking his eyes from the monster, Ned ascended the slight incline to examine the blockage. To test the solidity of the obstruction he shoved at it with his hand and was shocked when it shifted. So he put both hands on the obstacle and pushed.

The object, whatever it was, had decayed beyond recognition. "Could've broken out of here a long time ago," Ned muttered under his breath.

"*Do not take me for a fool, human,*" the creature snarled, making Ned start and press his hands to his head. The repugnant voice seared his brain. "*Powerful medicine holds me here. Destroy the jailers!*"

Ned regarded the opening reluctantly. Jailers?

But he didn't want that voice in his head again or the creature's teeth in his flesh, so he tore into the rotting mass. He blocked out any thoughts as to what the materials were or might have once been. When his hands penetrated the debris, he tore off huge hunks and threw them down. With a last mighty yank, the barrier crashed to the ground and his flashlight illuminated the dark hallowed eyes of the jailers. He took a step backward.

The skeletons sat, propped against the wall, spears by their sides. Decades of dust and cobwebs clung to shreds of clothing and protruding bones. Rawhide and beaded necklaces lay draped over exposed ribcages.

"*Smash them!*" The creature urged.

Wanting nothing more than to get out of this place, Ned didn't hesitate. He swung his leg sideways and smashed his foot into the closest skeleton. With minimal resistance from the brittle bones, the momentum carried through to the second body. Remains scattered and a cloud of dust billowed forth. He continued to kick and stomp, mutilating the decayed bodies. One of the skulls rolled toward Ned and he jumped back instinctively, watching it roll down the short passage to land at the edge of the water.

For the first time he glimpsed the creature's mighty tail. Longer than he would have imagined and slightly round, it was covered with shiny scales. The appendage snaked out

of the water and slammed down on the skull, cracking it into shards. Then a mighty paw emerged, claws the size of a velociraptor's digging into the wet dirt as the monster began to haul itself from the pool.

Ned ran in the only direction possible to escape the monster, crunching through the wreckage. Blindly, he fled down the dark passage, slamming into a rock wall as the shaft took a turn. With hardly a pause he continued, the burn in his thighs telling him the path sloped upward. A waft of fresh air urged him onward and he realized he could make out shapes. Slowing slightly, he scanned the shadows, fearing he might miss the outlet. The vegetation gave it away. Once Ned comprehended the shape of leaves and vines, he rushed to the opening clogged by stones and overgrown brush. Shoving large rocks in whichever direction they moved easily and ripping aside the vine riddled undergrowth; he extracted himself from the cave. Once he found stable footing on the loose stones, Ned paused for a moment to take in his surroundings.

He stood on a shoreline at the base of a high embankment. The moon had set. Before him the black waters of the lake he'd bathed in lay still and serene awaiting the brink of dawn. A noise like sand grating against the bottom of a metal boat emanated from the passage, spoiling the peaceful scene and spurring Ned into action. Not wanting to end up between the water and the monster, he searched the wall of earth and stone that surrounded the cave entrance. An exposed root offered a handhold while his feet found leverage on protruding rocks so he could scramble up the bank. At the top, he crawled over the edge, continuing into the woods on hands and knees, then turned and sat back on his heels to watch the spectacle below.

The mighty horned head appeared. The beast paused, muzzle in the air, testing the wind. With a snort, the monster jerked forward, shoving aside rocks and debris; using its shoulders to widen the cave opening. Claws gouged the sandy dirt as the creature extracted its mass from the subterranean prison and made its way to the lake. Once in the water, it glided snakelike, away from the shore until the tip of its tail was finally submerged.

Ned remained transfixed, marking the uncannily graceful progress of the beast until its muzzle sank. Only the copper horns protruded from the gentle waves. Seconds later, they too disappeared.

Deleted Scene 7: Peeping Ned

Ned watched from the shadows of the hospital parking deck as the Indian boy walked to his Jeep. He'd intentionally arrived before visiting hours were over so as not to draw attention to himself. A casual stroll past the old man's room however, revealed the boy inside. So Ned canvassed the parking deck—thank goodness the hospital was small—until he found the boy's vehicle. Fortunately, he knew exactly what he was looking for since he'd followed this Jeep the previous night.

Yesterday, Ned showed up at the resort where the family was staying hoping to find it empty so he could break in and find the object Manitou wanted. At first he thought he'd lucked out. Only a single car was parked behind the cottage. They were gone. But when he crept onto the deck and sidled up to the sliding glass door, he heard the television. Crouching low, Ned peeked through the glass. Two twenty-something guys occupied the room, eyes glued to whatever program they had on. Tangling with two guys their size would not be a wise move for Ned and would certainly botch his mission.

He swore. With so many people in the same place, the chance of them all being out at the same time was extremely low. He was better off planning to come back in the dead of night.

Already annoyed, he'd returned to the lakeshore only to find an old Indian dude poking around near the cave. With Manitou urging him on, Ned had banged a good sized rock into the guy's noggin. The satisfaction of watching the body slump to the ground helped alleviate a small portion of his frustration over his failure to retrieve the artifact.

So he bided his time and when he'd returned to the resort late last night, it seemed fate had given him yet another gift. He'd been skulking about the cottage examining the windows and doors while waiting for the family to go to bed when a vehicle approached and parked nearby. Ned watched as the girl's boyfriend hopped from the car, took a deep breath, and then knocked on the door. With nothing better to do, and the kitchen lit up so he could clearly see the scene inside, he observed the interaction between the couple.

Suddenly the girl dashed from the room and Ned's eyes stretched wide when she returned and extended her hand toward the boy, offering him something.

The artifact!

The boy took the object and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he stepped close to the girl. Ned rolled his eyes. It didn't take much imagination to know what would happen next. He headed for his motorcycle. When the boy left, he followed. He had to get that statue.

The stop at the hospital in Bemidji seemed odd, but Ned had no choice but to tail the boy—a challenging feat at such a late hour. Yet he managed to make it to the room in time to see the boy hand the statue over to an older man. Stunned for a moment when he realized the guy in the bed was the dude whose head he banged with a rock, Ned didn't notice the nurse until it was too late and he was kicked out of the hospital.

So he was back tonight and his plan to blend with the visitors was ruined. All he needed was for the old man to take a walk or go to the bathroom and he would've snatched the artifact and beat feet out of there, but no, now he not only had to sneak in after visiting hours, he also would have to wait for the dude to fall asleep.

He walked purposefully through the hospital's front doors and marched directly toward the elevators without making eye contact with the attendant at the information

desk. That was the easy part. Once he was beyond the woman's peripheral vision, Ned ducked into a corridor. Quickly scanning the signs, he had to turn a corner before he saw what he wanted—a stairwell. He quickly ascended to the second floor, again grateful this was a small hospital. When a brief check through the window of the second floor door showed no one in the hall, he opened the door, listened and then stuck his head out.

Moving furtively toward the old man's room, Ned passed by with barely a glance through the doorway, confirming the guy was in his bed. He checked other nearby rooms and eventually found a vacant one not too far down the hall. Melted into the shadows of the unlit room, he remained close enough to the doorway to monitor the old man's room.

It seemed an eternity passed before the room's bright light winked out and was replaced by the soft, blue glow of a television screen. Ned waited until the night nurse made her rounds and then tiptoed down the hall. He pressed himself to the wall when he heard the bed creak, but then there was a click and the blue glow faded and quickly disappeared.

At the edge of the doorframe, Ned strained to hear any further sound from the room while simultaneously listening for approaching footsteps. After a while, he peeked into the room. The man was turned away from the door. Crap. How could he know if the dude was sleeping or not?

Finally tired of waiting, Ned crept into the room and slipped behind the door to access the closet. Holding his breath, he pulled on the handle of the accordion door, wincing as it released with a snap. He paused. The room remained still. Gently, he worked the guide through the track until the opening was large enough to reach the man's belongings.

Ned quickly patted down the jacket and shirt on hangers then bent to the duffle bag on the floor.

He nearly missed it.

His hand was making a second pass over the contents of the duffle when he felt something unyielding wrapped in cloth.

Bingo.

The man in the bed stirred and Ned froze, clutching the bundle in one hand. He waited, motionless until he heard the sound of even breathing, then slipped from the room. He hurried to the stairwell. Safely behind the door, Ned paused and pulled the cloth from the object. A smile slowly spread across his face as he took in the horns and painted scales. This was it. Manitou would be pleased.

Once he returned to the cellar, he'd collapse the tunnel as instructed. Then one more trip for supplies, set the charges, and he was on his way to vengeance.

Deleted Scene 8: Asphyxiate

After lighting the fuse, Ned backed from the tunnel, dashed to the old furnace, then crouched behind it, arms shielding his head. Even though the blast was expected, the loud boom still made him jump. He hoped that the late hour, relatively remote and underground location helped to decrease the chances of the sound being heard. Clicking on his flashlight, he moved to inspect his handiwork. Smoke and fine dust swirled in the beam of light and he had to wait until it settled to see the mound of earth clogging the hole.

He grinned. His inspired thought that fireworks could come in handy had just proven true.

After a few more detonations, he deemed the tunnel reasonably impassable—especially considering soon the cellar itself would cease to exist. Ned combed his fingers through his short hair, making a face at the grit he felt. He was filthy. Using the long branch to force the door open, he chose the cleanest shirt and pants, tossed them topside, and then reached for the edge to hoist himself out. He paused for a moment and then walked to a corner of the cellar. He picked up the cloth with the statue inside, rolled the artifact into his hand, then dropped the cloth while he stuffed the object in his pocket.

He headed for the campground showers.

On his way back, scrubbing his clean hair with the towel, Ned stopped mid-stride. He swore he saw a flash of light near the cellar. Switching to stealth-mode, he crept forward. There it was again. As he drew closer, he heard voices.

The trap door was open.

Damn kids. No doubt some delinquent campers escaped their family and were out here screwing around. Possibly literally. Ned's face scrunched in distaste. He was going to scare the crap out of them.

Silently, he approached the open cellar. With their lights lit inside the cellar, the kids couldn't see very far into the darkness above, and Ned was able to get close enough to examine them. Rage immediately drowned his surprise as recognition dawned.

It was the girl! The girl who'd had the statue!

And someone else. Maybe her brother.

Son of a B!

How had they found the cellar?

What did they—

Ned suspended the questions and allowed his indignation to take over. He reached down and grasped the trap door, heaving it on its hinges. Just before he dropped it, he noticed some kind of purse or bag and kicked it over the edge. Then he dragged logs on top of the door, ignoring the muffled pleas coming from inside the cellar.

Fortunately, the tunnel was blocked. The kids were trapped. Ned already knew how he'd get rid of them. All he needed was a piece of hose and he'd just seen one back at the campground. He'd let the carbon dioxide do the dirty work while he rigged the charges. Then when he blew up the cellar, the bodies would be buried. By the time they were discovered, he'd be long gone.

Deleted Scene 9: Eliminate All Threats

Ned let out a string of profanity. How could things have gone so terribly wrong? Somehow the kids had survived asphyxiation. He didn't understand. And worse, they'd somehow escaped. Now Manitou insisted that before he'd tell Ned where to find Honey, he must help the monster eliminate all threats to its continued freedom. Ned couldn't comprehend why a fierce beast was concerned about a teenage girl, but he didn't much care. He was weary of this fiasco and wanted to be gone.

Immediately after finding the empty cellar, he got rid of any evidence that he'd been there. He expected cops to swarm the area at any moment and wondered if he'd even have a chance to set any charges in the vicinity. Then he entered the monster's lair from the beach and carefully made his way to the cavern at the end. He hurled the statue into the center of the pool, breathing a sigh of relief as it disappeared beneath the dark water.

To his amazement, the forest around the cellar remained vacant. No crime scene tape. No investigation whatsoever. Still, he exercised caution as he fabricated the explosives and set the detonators out of sight.

By evening, he was exhausted, and ready to take out his frustration on anyone who got in his way. He positioned himself at the edge of the woods near the embankment where the monster's cave was located. Lightning flashed, clearly showing the empty beach. A low rumble of thunder vibrated the ground where Ned sat, back against a tree.

At least an hour passed. The wind buffeted him in his perch atop the bank and he expected the skies to open at any minute and release the coming deluge. The anticipation of conflict along with the tension of the hovering storm stretched his nerves taut. Just as he thought he might snap, a light glimmered on the shoreline to his left. His eyes remained fixed on the spot and soon he could see more than one light bobbing along the beach. Ned pulled his feet under him and duck-walked behind the tree. He had no fear of making noise as the wind whipping through the trees made it impossible to hear anything aside from the hiss and swish of leaves.

In the next flash of lightning, he was able to discern three silhouettes—two larger and one smaller. Noting the long hair dancing in the constant gusts of wind, Ned was certain the smallest was the girl. Not long after, his night vision revealed the old man and the boy who was in the cellar with the girl last night.

He watched with smug satisfaction as the group approached the cave and entered without hesitation. The only thing better would have been if the Indian boy was with them. But one loose end would not be hard to tie up—he considered it a win to take out three with one blow. Ned snickered. One blow.

And it would be one big-ass blow.

He rose and walked a few paces into the forest, then bent to push aside the brush he used to conceal the detonator. He smiled. Pressed the lever.

His muscles tensed, awaiting the tremor; the blast.

Nothing happened.

Son of a B! Could he not catch a break here?

Ned reset the detonator and tried again.

Nothing.

Cursing, he began following the wire back to the shoreline. Close to the cave, Ned found a large limb downed by the wind which had broken a connection. He bent to fix it and with his head down, nearly missed another light flitting across the sand and rocks below. As the beam traveled the bank, he instantly sunk low to the ground.

Could it be?

Maybe he could catch a break.

He congratulated himself as the skies lit up, revealing the Indian boy. Fantastic. The boy would follow the others into the cave and Ned could eliminate all of them.

Except that's not what happened. Ned frowned as he watched the boy pass the cave and continue down the shoreline. He traced the boy's light for quite a distance—certainly farther than he should've been able to—then saw the boy turn and head back toward the cave.

Was he their lookout? Patrolling the beach?

Not if Ned could help it.

He quickly twisted the wires together, his eyes on the shoreline. No one was going to ruin this for him. Not now. Not when he was so close. Fueled by those thoughts, he launched himself from the bank and hit the boy with enough force to knock him to the ground. Momentum hurled Ned beyond his target and he hurried to his feet, prepared to fight.

The boy lay still.

Ned raised his eyebrows and approached warily, mindful of a trap. He nudged the body with his foot. When the boy remained motionless, Ned laughed. He considered kicking the kid in the head but considering the field of rocks where the body lay, there was a good chance Ned might hurt his foot. Instead, he scoured the area for a rock just right for head bashing. As he rose with a nice sized boulder in his hands, a disturbance in the lake drew his attention. Although the wind had been rippling the surface of the water for hours, this motion was different: roiling, heaving, swirling.

Seconds later, two points appeared amidst the agitated water.

Ned took a step back. He dropped the rock.

He jerked his head to the left at a shout and saw the old Indian running toward him. With one last glance at the horns rising from the surface of the water Ned ran for the embankment.

He scrambled for hand and footholds as the old man approached quickly—much faster than Ned would have expected. Finally getting hold of a tree root, he pulled himself over the lip of the bank, his legs dangling. As his feet kicked, struggling for purchase, he felt an iron grip close on his ankle. Straining to pull himself forward, he dragged the Indian with him up the slope. Most of Ned's body was now over the edge and he flipped over hoping to twist the old man's arm, forcing him to let go.

But the older man clung stubbornly.

Ned propped himself up on his hands and took careful aim, then rammed his foot squarely into the man's chest.

The old guy let go and flew backwards. Ned leaned forward and watched him drop. The body smacked hard onto the rocks and despite the racket of the impending storm, Ned heard the distinct crack of breaking bone. The old man didn't move.

A shiny black pool beneath the man's head showed in stark relief during the next burst of lightning. Ned stared out over the water but the horns had disappeared and the surface was again only buffeted by the wind.

The boy's body was gone.

Deleted Scene 10: Knock Out

Ned skidded into the pile of brush and paused long enough to press the lever on the detonator. A quick glance over his shoulder showed his pursuer stop for an instant, awed first by the flash of light and then by the deafening boom followed by an earthy rumble. Ned chortled wickedly, reveling that his homemade bomb had been successful after all. Any chemical geek worth his salt could make a bomb from fertilizer.

As he continued his flight through the forest, he hoped the girl was still inside the cave when the passage exploded. The old man must surely be dead. And the monster had taken the Indian boy. As soon as he dispatched with the boy chasing him, he'd blow the cellar and then get the heck outta Dodge.

The older boy had taken him by surprise at first. He'd planned to drag the old man's body inside and then blow the mouth of the cave. He never saw the boy leave, but luckily, a bit of crumbling earth sliding down the embankment warned him of the boy's presence. Ned dodged being tackled and then took off into the woods.

The boy gave chase but had no chance of catching up in the dark. He might have youth on his side, but Ned could see far better, allowing him to run faster. He arrived in the clearing and dashed behind the overgrown chimney, not really trying to hide, simply melding with the blackness.

He didn't have to kill the boy, just disable him enough to roll him into cellar. Then he'd blow the cellar and get back on the hunt for Honey.

He saw the boy's silhouette approaching cautiously. He grinned and shifted position so he could get a clean hit. If he was anyone else, he'd be exposed. He drew back his fist. Just as he was about to strike, lightning lit the forest, illuminating the kid's surprised face.

Although Ned's fist was already in motion when the scene lit up, the boy had quick reflexes and dodged the blow, swinging his own arm back. As Ned followed his fist forward, the kid swung his flashlight, smashing it down on Ned's back.

As the force of the impact drove him face down, Ned grunted in surprise. Then the boy was on top of him and Ned twisted and flailed trying to escape. He was strong, but the kid was bigger. None of Ned's enhancements could give him an edge once he was pinned down.

Actually, thanks to his night vision, Ned clearly saw the boy's fist hurtling toward his face and since there was no escaping it, he wished he couldn't see it.

Then his head exploded in pain and his vision blacked out.

Deleted Scene 11: Ned Reaps What He Sowed

Ned didn't realize how awesome the cold ground felt on his pounding head until he tried to examine his surroundings. As his face lifted from the dirt, pain skewered his left eye and only his right eyelid lifted to allow him to look around. Memories flooded back: the explosion of the cave entrance, the chase through the forest, and the boy's fist smashing into his temple.

Despite the prevailing darkness, he could make out the shape of the nearby dirt pile and further in the distance, the furnace. The kid had deposited him in the cellar. Ned guessed the throbbing in his left shoulder was more likely due to the seven foot tumble than his hands being tied behind his back. Since his legs were unencumbered, he rolled to his right side, bent his knee to provide a stable base, then gradually drew himself upright.

He needed to free his hands and then get the heck out of here before the boy brought back the cavalry.

A moan slipped out as he rose unsteadily to his feet. More than his shoulder had absorbed the impact of being dropped into the cellar. Shuffling to the corner where he'd stowed his pilfered tools, Ned let loose with a string of obscenities. *Crap!* He'd forgotten he got rid of everything when he expected the cops to show up here.

Son of a B. This could not be happening. He considered summoning Manitou, but the monster was in the lake when the cave entrance blew; it was no help to Ned here. And even if Manitou could persuade someone to help—just as he'd recruited Ned—surely it would be too late.

He stared blankly at the ancient furnace. An eyebrow twitched upward. Maybe there *was* something useful left down here. He crouched to inspect the structure which consisted mainly of steel plates and ductwork. The rolled metal was fairly crude, with rough edges.

Possibly sharp edges?

The door which allowed fuel to be added to the furnace was already removed so Ned sat down and turned his back to the opening. He tested the edge with his thumb. It was worth a try. The angle he needed to press the ropes against the corner of the steel wrenched his aching shoulder even more, but he knew he had no other options. The rasping of hemp across the uneven surface sounded promising.

Time stretched out, until Ned hovered near hysteria. At first, he'd allowed an occasional break in his efforts to rest his shoulder—the dull ache had soon turned into a sharp pain—but as time passed, he paused only for a brief moment. If he didn't free himself, he faced a whole new world of hurt. Problem was, he couldn't see behind his back; couldn't judge his progress. The subtle snap each time a rope fiber broke convinced him he wasn't wasting his time though—assuming the tiny noise was actually the rope splitting.

Beads of sweat formed on Ned's forehead and dripped into his eyes. Suddenly he stopped. What was that?

It sounded like the swish of footsteps through dead leaves on the forest floor.

Ah crap.

Ned began scraping the rope against the steel at a frenzied pace. His muscles strained with effort as he pushed hard against the rough edge.

Voices sounded from above—too muffled to make out words, but the timbre of the conversation indicated males.

Ned's heart hammered in his chest at the grating noise on the trap door. He knew the sound. Heck, he'd made that sound while dragging logs both on and off the door above.

Without warning, his hands jerked. His right wrist slammed into the unyielding metal and Ned emitted a small cry of pain. His left hand thrust through the opening used to fuel the furnace, leaving some flesh from his knuckles on the inside furnace wall. Neither of these things warranted much attention because Ned was free.

His choice of action was limited. Judging by the voices above, there were more than two people up there—more than Ned could handle by himself—which meant he must hide. Only one avenue remained: the tunnel.

Ned scurried in that direction, wishing he hadn't caved the shaft in already. As he hurried forward on hands and knees, he realized the passage was open. He didn't have time to consider why that might be, he was just grateful.

The creak of old hinges echoed from the cellar.

He crawled backward, brushing away his tracks. Then he scooped up loose dirt with both hands and threw it down the passage to further erase his trail. He heard shoes crunch on the cellar's floor. Ned's breath came in uneven gasps as he frantically regressed down the tunnel. After scrambling through the hole and into the cavern, he glanced back along the small shaft and caught a flash of light from the other end. He began making his way around the pool.

The cave was silent as a tomb. Ned wondered if the girl was in here. The thought didn't bother him; she could be taken care of easily.

The pitch black challenged his enhanced vision as he picked his way around the water, mostly by feel. At the opening to the passage which once led to the lake, Ned recoiled at the feel of something soft against his face. He patted his shirt pocket and removed a lighter. After three tries, his shaking hands succeeded in producing a flame and he examined the object hanging from the cave ceiling. He remembered breaking through here days ago. This time though, the barrier was not mostly disintegrated so he ducked under it, his skin crawling at the furry sensation on the back of his neck.

On the other side he paused, unsure what to do next. Was the girl in here? Was she alive? Or was she buried in the rubble that used to be the cave entrance?

Ned froze at a sound from the cavern. Wavering light leaked from around the edges of the barrier. "He's not in here," a voice called. A comment Ned couldn't make out came from further down the tunnel followed by a reply: "There aren't any tracks. Besides, why would he come this way? It's a dead end. I'm telling you, he escaped."

A grin tugged at the corners of Ned's mouth. Seriously? They'd fallen for his ruse?

The light disappeared from the other side of the crude curtain. Ned peeked into the large chamber. The tunnel entrance flickered dimly for a moment and then went black. He began making his way around the pool. Intent on listening for sounds from the tunnel, he didn't notice the black water lapping at the periphery of the huge basin.

"*Gushkewau*." The name crawled up Ned's spine and the fine hair on the back of his neck prickled in warning.

He was ten feet from the exit. He dashed toward it.

"*You have failed miserably.*"

Ned could still hear voices in the cellar and he paused with his hands on the lip of the tunnel opening. "But I disposed of the statue. And the girl," he whispered desperately. He peered over his shoulder at the churning water.

It was here. The monster was in here!

"The girl lives. I am trapped. Our deal is null."

His lips pursed to protest, Ned clamped his mouth shut when he saw the twin spikes pierce the water's surface. He needed to cut his losses. Pulling hard with his hands, he heaved himself into the tunnel. He could barely hear the others—he guessed they must be out of the cellar. He did, however, clearly make out four words which seized his chest in a vice-grip of terror: "Let's blow it then."

The trap door banged shut, breaking Ned's stupor and spurring him into action. He opened his mouth to shout as he scurried down the tunnel, but the explosion drowned out any sound he might have made and propelled him back the way he came.

Later, minutes or hours, Ned had no way of knowing, his eyes fluttered open. He lay in a crumpled heap covered with dirt. The lighter remained gripped in his fist. He thumbed the wheel twice before the small flame came to life. He lay near the tunnel opening to the cavern. His gaze was fixed on the hole; facing his fate.

A cunning, elliptically shaped eyeball stared back at him.

"Son of a B," he whispered.