

# Them!

by Tanaqui

"I'm telling you—" Bill's excitable tones came clear down the bar above the background hubbub of Bailey's. "—Fred Drummond said there were giant ants out west towards Denver. It's the radiation. I'm telling you."

Jake shook his head and took another swig of beer. Seemed like Bill hadn't changed a bit in the five years he'd been away. Hadn't changed since they'd been at school together, come to that. Probably still believed that story about some elementary school kid over in New Bern getting his head chopped off hanging out the window of the school bus.

"I'm telling you—" For some reason, Jake couldn't seem to tune Bill out. "—the mayor's not taking it seriously. Just laughed about it. Like God knows *what* isn't happening out there."

Jake leaned forward and peered along the bar. Bill seemed to be holding court to a half dozen guys, and the two or three girls hanging off their arms. Someone said, "Mayor Green's not even sending anyone to take a look?"

"Right." Bill waved his hands. "Just sticking his head in the sand. Like he always does."

Jake slid off his stool and made his way down the bar. "Hey, Bill. What exactly did Fred say to you?"

Bill folded his arms and leaned back against the bar. "That Jack Levinson told him his wife heard from Arnold Frederickson that he'd seen giant ants out west towards Denver." Bill turned back to his audience. "I'm telling you. It's the radiation. If we don't take action now, we'll be overrun by the things."

One of the girls gave a little squawk of fear.

Jake laughed. "Come on, Bill. Giant irradiated ants? This is a not a 1950s B-movie."

"Oh, you can laugh." Bill glared at Jake. "But Arnold says he saw them. That mushroom cloud over Denver? It got them ants, and turned 'em all giant. And now they're making their way towards us, and we're gonna be fighting them on Main Street. Just you wait and see."

There were some mutterings of agreement from the crowd around them, and someone behind Jake—everyone within a few yards seemed to be listening to Bill now—said. "Damn right!"

"Uh." Jake turned and saw Heather hobbling awkwardly, a step at a time, down from the upper level. She blushed a little and chuckled nervously as everybody looked at her. "I, uh, I don't think that's actually possible."

Bill raised a skeptical eyebrow, a slight sneer on his face.

Heather straightened as she reached the bottom step, squaring up to him. "Ants take at least ten days to go through their life cycle. Even if the radiation *did* do something to them, there's no way you could get giant ants *already*."

She glanced around the circle that had developed around the three of them—Bill, Jake and herself—and caught Jake's eye. He gave her a slight nod, grateful for her intervention, for a voice of sanity.

"And you're an expert on ants, are you?" Bill smirked at the crowd, and gained a laugh, although there was still tension in room. Jake could see the fear on people's faces: what if there really *were* giant ants?

Heather gave Bill an exasperated look. "We had one of those ant farms at school last year. So, yes."

Bill seemed slightly taken aback by that, but only for a moment. "Guess you're an expert on radiation, too?" he snapped back at her.

Jake saw Heather reel back at the venom in Bill's voice, although she quickly rallied herself and opened her mouth. Before she could speak, Jake took a step forward, half interposing himself between her and Bill. He knew she had guts, but he suspected she also didn't have any idea how futile it was to argue logically with a guy like Bill when he'd got an audience, an ax to grind and a rush of blood to the head.

"Look," he said peaceably to Bill, "why don't you and I go out to the Fredericksons' place and see what's happening out there."

Bill's eyes widened in surprise at the suggestion. Then he puffed up his chest. "No way. I'm not going out unless the mayor gives authorization and proper backup." He gave Jake a smug look. "There's only two of us deputies left. We gotta to be careful."

Jake rolled his eyes. "So you'd rather wait until the ants get to Main Street before you do anything?"

Bill pulled his head back, straightening from his slight slouch, as if offended by the application of logic. "I'm just saying." He uncrossed his arms and rested his hands on the bar on either side of him. "The mayor should send someone to check it out. Shouldn't be me."

"Fine. I'll find someone else. Or go by myself." Jake shook his head, wondering how he'd gotten bounced into doing something so stupid. Though not unnecessary, he thought, looking again at the scared faces around him.

Most people avoided his gaze, probably because they were either embarrassed to be taking the thing seriously or in case he thought they were volunteering for the expedition. Twisting around, he met Heather's steady look.

"I'll go with you," she offered, her voice quiet but firm.

"Thanks." He smiled at her. "We could do with an ant expert."

Her lips twitched in amusement, but she simply nodded her head and let him usher her from the bar.

Outside, it was dark; without main power, none of the streetlamps or lights on the surrounding buildings were lit. "We should get some flashlights from the sheriff's office," Jake suggested.

Heather nodded, and they crossed the street towards City Hall. Jake noticed she didn't limp so badly on the flat, but she was still moving awkwardly. He tilted his head. "How's your leg doing?"

She shrugged. "I can manage. You'll have to drive, though. And I'm not much good with steps...." She waved her hand towards the ramp up to the side entrance to City Hall, and Jake followed her as she headed in that direction. Halfway up the ramp, Heather cast a glance over her shoulder at him. "So. We really are going to drive out west and look for giant ants?"

He hurried forward to help her with the heavy swing door. "You think we'd be wasting our time?"

"Do I think we'll find anything?" She chuckled. "No. Do I think letting one of the town's two remaining deputies run his mouth off in Bailey's and start a panic is a good idea?" She gave Jake a sideways look that provided all the answer he needed, and he laughed.

Inside City Hall, they headed for the Sheriff's Office, where they found Jimmy on his own. "Hey, Jimmy." Jake leaned on the counter. "Can we borrow a couple of those large flashlights?"

"Sure thing, Jake." Jimmy ambled over to a storage locker. "What do you need them for?"

"Bill's got some story about giant ants out west. Heather and I are going to check it out."

"Son." Jake jumped; he hadn't noticed his father standing in the door leading from the entrance hall. "You don't seriously believe that nonsense, do you?"

Jake bridled. Seemed like Dad still didn't give him credit for having two braincells to rub together. "I—," he started to object, when Heather's hand on his arm stopped him.

"No, we don't, Mr. Mayor," she said quietly. "But Bill was scaring a lot of people in Bailey's. Everybody's on edge, and Jake thought it would calm things down if we went and took a look, and came back and reported there was nothing to see."

Johnston regarded her for a moment, before he shifted his gaze back to Jake. "You'll need a car." Digging in his pocket, he produced a set of keys and tossed them over. Jake managed to catch them, despite his surprise. Johnston added, "Just don't get yourselves into any trouble out there."

Jake took the flashlights that Jimmy was holding out to him. "We won't."

oOo

Heather waited in the car while they swung by the house so Jake could pick up a pistol and one of his dad's hunting rifles. Lucky for him, his mom wasn't around, and he didn't have to explain why he needed them.

"So, do we have a plan?" Heather asked, as they pulled away.

Jake cut through the residential streets, noting how dark and quiet they seemed. It felt more like midnight than early evening. "Thought we'd go talk to the Fredericksons first. Find out what they actually saw."

Heather nodded. "Sounds like a good idea. You know where they—?" She stopped and laughed nervously. "Of course you do. You grew up here."

"Uh-huh." He glanced across at her. "So how long have you been in Jericho?"

"'Bout three years." She was peering out of the window on her side of the car. Beyond the dim

reflection of her face in the glass, lit by the green glow of the lights on the car's dash, he could see the occasional flicker of candlelight in the windows of the houses they were passing. She gave a slight shrug. "Came here when I got my teaching license. But I grew up over in New Bern."

"You got family there still?" He turned onto the main road leading west out of town.

"Not any more." She sighed and turned away from the blank, black fields now invisibly rolling by on either side. "My mom passed while I was in college, and my dad a couple of years back. No brothers and sisters...."

She seemed young to have lost both parents. He did a quick calculation in his head and decided she couldn't be more than twenty five, twenty six at the most. "Sorry." He cleared his throat. "I guess at least you don't have to worry about what's happening to them."

"No." She looked across at him. "You must be glad you were in Jericho when, you know—."

He snorted. He wasn't sure being stuck here was so great. But she did have a point: at least he knew his family was okay.

They were silent while another mile or so of road rolled past. Jake was keeping an eye out for the turn to the Fredericksons' place: he couldn't remember exactly how far out of town it was. Suddenly, a flicker of movement to the right caught his eye. Instinctively, he slammed on the brakes, pulling the car to the left.

Heather gave a small shriek as they swerved around the deer, which turned a hair's-breadth from the fender and bounded back the way it came. Panting heavily, Jake let the car roll to a stop, and carefully unclenched his hands from their death grip on the wheel.

"You okay?" He turned to Heather.

She had her hand to her chest and her eyes closed, but she gave a little nod. "Yeah. Just...." She opened her eyes and smiled weakly at him. "That was close!"

"Uh-huh." He leaned across and squinted past her at where the deer had disappeared into the dark. Probably a mule deer, although it had looked the size of a damned elk, or at least that's what it seemed like when he replayed the incident back in his mind. "Should've remembered you get a lot out on this road."

He began to pull back and then stopped, taking another look at her. "You really okay?"

She flapped a hand to wave away his concern. "Yeah. Just think I've had enough deer-related incidents this week...."

"Right." He'd forgotten for a moment that the schoolbus had hit one. Settling back in his seat, he peered at where the headlamps were lighting up the bottom of a sign. Putting the car back into gear, he eased her forward and the name Frederickson sprang into view. "Well, looks like we're here."

oOo

Arnold Frederickson had laughed when he'd answered Jake's knock. "All I told Irma Levinson was that the ants in the field out back were acting real crazy the morning after the bomb." He scratched

his head. "Them's pretty big ant heaps out there, but I don't remember mentioning anything about the *ants* being giant...."

"It sounds like a game of Telephone," Heather suggested. When Jake looked at her, wondering what she meant, she shrugged. "You know. Everyone misheard the previous person a little bit, and the story got changed each time...."

Jake nodded. Sounded about right in Jericho: rumors had a way of totally getting out of hand even when things were normal. Still.... He turned back to Arnold. "Mind if we go out back and check ourselves?"

"Be my guest." Arnold shook his head. "But you won't find nothing." He gestured sideways. "You'll find most of the ant mounds over by the fence. Just watch yourselves underfoot."

When Jake led Heather round the back of the house and past the chain-link fence that separated the Fredericksons' yard from the field, he discovered what Arnold had meant: the field had been plowed a week or so before, and the soil stood in hard sharp ridges.

"You okay with this?" He glanced back over his shoulder as he waved the beam from his flashlight over the rough ground.

"Yeah." Heather sounded slightly out of breath as she turned her flashlight sideways. "It's not so bad if we go round the edge." She set off ahead of him along the undisturbed strip that lay to one side of the plowsoil, the beam of her flashlight wavering over the ground just in front of her.

Jake followed, directing his own flashlight to light up the post-and-rail fence that ran to one side of the field. He could see low heaps of brownish earth every few yards.

Heather reached the first heap and stopped. Jake stepped up next to her and shone his flashlight down onto the top of the mound. As the light hit the cone, the soil began to seethe and boil. Startled, he took a step back, caught his heel on a ridge of soil, and went flying backward, the flashlight tumbling out of his hand. The dry soil crumbled under his palms when he put them out to break his fall, and he snatched his hands up as his instincts screamed that there were *Ants! Everywhere!*

"Jake?" Heather shone her flashlight at him, careful not to blind him. "Are you okay?" He could hear laughter in her voice, along with concern. "Guess I should've warned you...."

"Yeah." His heart was still thudding, but he could see the soil around him was clear of the scuttling monsters he'd imagined for a moment. A moment in which, he realized with a grimace, he'd let out an entirely embarrassing squeak.

He groped for the flashlight, which had rolled a few inches away, its beam pointing crazily upward, and levered himself back to his feet.

"Here." Heather took a step back toward him and reached out to gently dust off the soil clinging to his jacket. She peered up at him, the hint of worry in her expression just visible in the glow from the flashlights. Her hand lingered on his arm. "You sure you're okay?"

He gave an embarrassed laugh. "Apart from feeling like a complete fool? Yeah."

She gave his arm a squeeze and smiled at him. "We're all a bit jumpy. And if you weren't expecting that...." She turned away from him and shone her light back at the mound. "I got used to ants with

the ant farm, but spiders—!" She gave an exaggerated shudder as she carefully leaned forward and again peered down at the ant heap. "Anyway, these little guys seem perfectly normal to me."

Jake joined her and saw with relief that most of the ants had disappeared—underground, he guessed. Heather stepped around him and headed for the next mound; again there was a rush of activity as she shone her light at it, but Jake was prepared for it this time.

"And these." Heather switched the flashlight into her other hand, the beam waving crazily for a moment before it settled again, and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

"So I guess we can go back to town and tell everybody that everything's normal?" Jake gestured with his light for them to head back to the farmhouse.

"Or what passes for normal, now? Yes." Heather sighed as they began to plod back around the field. "I'm guessing ants, giant or not, are going to be the least of our problems."

"Yeah." Jake nodded. Things were going to be a little crazy for a while. But—he snuck a glance sideways and smiled to himself—he reckoned having someone as smart and level-headed as Heather around was going to help. A lot.

**Disclaimer:** These stories are based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. They were written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from them nor was any infringement of copyright intended.