

**Names of Power:  
The Angel**

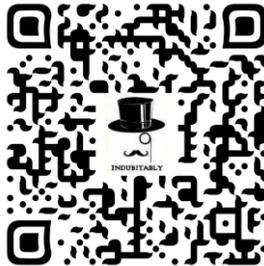
BOOK ONE OF THE  
NAMES OF POWER SERIES

TRAVIS GALVAN

# Names of Power: The Angel

By Travis Galvan

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## TO MY CHILDREN

I dedicate this book to my children, Kyla and TJ, who are my inspiration. Every moment I have with you in my life is a gift I cherish. You are my greatest works of art.

## WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO...

The two best friends of my life: my wife, Anne; and my older brother, Felix. Your love and encouragement helped bring this dream to life.

My father and mother, for the sense of adventure I developed while under your wings.

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## PROLOGUE

A sudden wave of pain brought Ren to the ground. She gritted her teeth and held her breath to stop herself from screaming. The infection felt like a red-hot poker pressing into the cut on the back of her arm. Other than the pain, she felt no sensation in her injured limb. Worst of all, the pain and numbness were spreading.

She shuddered at the pain of her broken ribs as she tried to push herself up on her good arm. Somehow, the medallion Brad had left on the floor had found its way around her wrist while she was unconscious. She looked up to see the stone door still closed. Just then, she lost her peripheral vision. She had to get out. She had to get back.

“Open!”

The door obeyed her command and she reached out with her good arm, a weak attempt to crawl. The pain sapped her strength and she fell again to the ground.

“Foreman! Come!”

## **Chapter 1**

### **DACHSHUNDS IN THE NIGHT**

FOUR MONTHS EARLIER:

Trey stood at the kitchen window, watching his two kids jumping on the trampoline. He twisted the end of his reddish goatee. The color, which he inherited from his Irish grandfather on his mother's side, was a stark contrast from the dark brown hair on his head. The rest of his features came from his father's side of the family, which had moved to the States from Mexico several generations back.

The night's oppressive heat drove the kids to position a sprinkler under the mesh.

Ren, now sixteen years old, feared her last and final growth spurt had come to an end. Her height, as she would put it, was "five foot and a smidgen." She had hoped to make it six more inches before she finally stopped growing. That way she could stand even with her father, but that was looking less and less likely every day. Though only a quarter Hispanic, she bore the majority of her father's features. She flipped through the air, dark brown eyes wide with

excitement. Her long dark hair, now wet, swung wildly around her head.

Bo, at fourteen, still stood a bit shorter than his sister. His height, or lack thereof, and his family name were the only traits he had inherited from his father. He had dirty blond hair, fair skin, and hazel eyes. Basically, every recessive gene Trey had to offer. He bounced and flipped alternately with his sister so they wouldn't land at the same time and take each other out.

The clock struck twelve, but it was summer break, so Trey allowed the kids more latitude with bedtime. As a single parent, he spent a lot of time in introspection, wondering whether he was giving his kids too much or not enough freedom. What he wanted to do was keep them under lock and key, but that would defeat the whole purpose of being their dad, which was to teach them to become adults who know how to function in the real world. How could they learn if they were never allowed out? He certainly wasn't going to let them run roughshod all over town, but he had to believe he'd taught them well enough to be trusted on their own — to some extent, anyway.

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Ren heard an odd growl from the other side of the fence and jumped high to see where it had come from. At the apex of her jump, she saw two short-haired dachshunds wrestling in the backyard of the house behind her own.

“Bo, they got wiener dogs!”

Bo jumped high into the air to see but said nothing.

A few bounces later, they saw one of their new neighbors emerge from the house to join the dogs. Between the light of the moon and the porch light, the kids saw the neighbor had gauze bandages covering much of his

exposed skin.

He spoke a foreign word and the dogs lined up like soldiers. The neighbor walked to the side gate, spoke again in the unfamiliar language, and opened the gate, releasing the dogs into the field at the end of the block.

“Howdy, neighbor!” shouted Ren as she and her brother continued to jump up and down, peeking over the fence.

The neighbor looked briefly at the kids, waved curtly, and returned to the house.

“I wonder why he lets his dogs out on their own so late at night. And did you get a good look at him? He looks like he might have been in some kind of accident.”

Bo shrugged and kept bouncing.

Twenty minutes later, their father came out to turn off the sprinkler and bring the kids in for the night. After quick showers, the kids climbed into their pajamas and went to bed. As Ren gazed at the moon through her bedroom window, she couldn't help but wonder about the dogs running off into the night alone. Would they be okay by themselves?

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Between spoonfuls of breakfast cereal, Ren paused to clear her mouth. “I saw our new neighbor last night.”

“Really? When?” asked Trey as his eyes darted from his daughter to his biscuit as he drizzled honey.

“Last night right before we came in. He's got two dogs.”

Trey furrowed his brow and reckoned, “Hmm — I haven't heard any barking. He must keep them inside most of the time.”

Ren shrugged, “I don't know. I guess so.”

Bo looked at each of them from time to time as he ate but for the most part, he stayed focused on his cereal.

“So, can we go meet him when we’re done?” asked Ren.

“Well, I have to get started on some stuff for work,” said Trey as he took his plate to the sink.

Ren released a disappointed sigh and dropped her hands to her lap.

“I’ll tell you what,” he continued, “Take your brother with you and don’t go in his house. You can give him a quick hello and welcome to the neighborhood, then come home. Don’t be any longer than ten minutes.” Then he leveled his gaze at his daughter and added, “If I have to come get you, you’ll be in trouble. You got me?”

“Yes, sir!” she agreed and took a big bite, motioning for her brother to hurry.

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After breakfast, the kids rode their bikes around the block to meet their new neighbor. They also wanted to make sure the wiener dogs got home safe. As they approached the glass door, they saw a pile of boxes in the entryway. Though the moving truck had come and gone a week ago, they hadn’t finished unpacking.

Bo rang the doorbell, which summoned the man they had seen the night before. He looked much better and the bandages were gone.

“Hey, aren’t you the kids who were jumping on the trampoline last night?” asked the man.

Ren nodded. “Yeah. Hi, I’m Ren. This is my brother, Bo.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Brad,” said the man as he extended his hand to Ren and her brother. “What brings you

by?”

Ren looked past the man and scanned his floor. “Well, we were just here to make an introduction and to make sure your dogs got home safe. I was hoping I could play with them a little. I love dogs but Dad won’t let me have one.”

“Oh. Hmmm. The dogs actually belong to my sister. I was sending them home last night when you saw me let them out. They know their way home.”

Ren was impressed at how well they must be trained to go home on command. “That’s pretty neat. By the way, you’re looking much better today. I was afraid you had been in an accident or something.”

“Thanks for noticing,” Brad said with a smirk. “I ate some brownies last night and didn’t notice they had nuts in them. I broke out all over, so I took a bunch of meds and coated myself in ointment. I was better when I got up this morning.”

Two men entered the room behind Brad and tossed some empty boxes into a pile in the corner. The first stood around six feet tall with dark hair and pale skin. The second towered over the first. He must have been at least seven feet tall. He had thick dark hair and a five o’clock shadow, even though the morning had just started.

Brad glanced over his shoulder and took notice of the men. “Hey, guys, come on over and meet our neighbors. They live in the house behind ours.”

The roommates turned from the boxes and came to the door.

Brad stepped aside and gave introductions. “Ren and Bo, these are my roommates, Lan and Joey. Lan and Joey, Ren and her brother, Bo.”

“How y’all doing?” asked Lan as he ducked and leaned out to shake their hands.

“Hi,” Ren began, then pointed to her brother and said, “Bo doesn’t say much. We’re good, though.”

Bo shook Lan’s hand and stepped back next to his sister.

Ren noted as she shook Lan’s hand, the tips of her fingers only reached halfway across his over-sized palm. It made her feel like she had baby hands.

After all the hellos and an awkward moment of silence, Brad ran his fingers through his curly brown hair and turned to the others to say, “Well, you guys are ready to go, right?”

“Yeah,” Lan agreed and ducked into the next room to return with a laptop under his arm.

Brad turned to the door to give his farewell. “Sorry, guys. We’ve got to get out of here. We need to get our new office set up so we can start taking on clients by next week.”

Ren arched one of her brows and asked, “What do you guys do?”

“We’re private investigators,” Brad replied.

“Really? That’s so cool!” beamed Ren.

Bo didn’t say a word but, instead, gave a thumbs-up to Brad.

“Alright, we really need to get out of here. You have fun.” Brad took hold of the door and pulled it shut.

“Okay, bye!” cheered Ren, then turned to lead Bo back to the yard. As they climbed onto their bikes, they saw the garage door rise, revealing a large black truck. They stopped to watch the three of them drive off.

“Don’t you think it would be awesome to spy on people and solve mysteries for a living?” asked Ren as she started back around the block.

\*\*\*

Lan turned left onto the main road, pulling out of the subdivision and said, “So, those are our new neighbors huh?” He glanced at Brad, who sat in the front passenger seat.

“That’s them, alright,” replied Brad as he rolled down his window and rested his elbow on the door.

\*\*\*

At home, the two found their father reading the local news online. “Hey, guys, check this out. Do you remember a few months back there were reports of some kind of animal attacks in Denton? There’s been like four or five people killed up there.”

Ren focused on the screen and said, “Yeah, I heard about that.”

Trey pointed to an article at the top of the page and added, “It looks like a similar attack just happened last night not far from here. It says here it was on the greenbelt near Cravens Park. I know coyotes live in the woods along the creek, but they don’t normally attack humans.”

Ren leaned against the edge of the desk and asked, “Do you think they would come into our neighborhood?”

“Normally, coyotes stay away from people,” Trey explained. “But I’ve seen them crossing the street at the end of the block. It might be a good idea if you two stay inside after dark until someone finds the animal that’s been doing this.”

“Okay,” agreed Ren. “Oh! We wanted to tell you about the new neighbors. They’re private investigators. Isn’t that awesome?”

Trey tilted his head curiously and said, “That *is* pretty awesome. I wonder if they can help me figure out what I did with my lucky quarter. I could have sworn I left it on my

nightstand next to the clock.”

“For being lucky, it sure does like to get lost,” teased Ren.

“Yeah, I was just thinking that myself,” Trey mused as he scanned the room for the rogue quarter. “I normally try to keep it where I can see it.”

Bo smiled and elbowed his sister.

She smirked and asked, “And how’s that working out for you?”

“Not so great right now. I must’ve lost that thing fifty times since my grandpa first gave it to me. Somehow it always finds its way back. Bah, I’m sure I’ll see it again when I least expect it. Alright, guys, I need to work. You, go do something productive and keep out of trouble,” commanded Trey.

“Will do!” agreed Ren and pecked her father on the cheek before leading her brother out of the room. “Come on,” she whispered, “I have an idea.”

Once in the garage, out of earshot from their father, she unveiled her plan. “Let’s go down the path to Cravens Park. I bet we can find the place where that animal attack happened.”

Bo smiled as he threw his leg over the seat of his bike.

## **Chapter 2**

### **ON THE RIGHT PATH**

Several miles down the path, the kids saw police tape strung through the trees. The tape marked off a wide area fifteen yards off the path. Half a dozen officers within the perimeter took photos, collected samples, and made notes. Just outside the perimeter stood a thin woman. She wore khaki shorts and a blue golf shirt with “City of Arlington Parks and Recreation” emblazoned across the back.

Ren pulled up next to the woman, but she didn’t seem to notice. She glanced at her brother, then back to the Parks employee and asked, “Is this the place where they found that animal attack victim?”

“Ah!” shouted the woman, who turned to Ren with wide eyes, placing an open palm against her heart. “Dang it, kid! You scared the crap out of me.” She took a moment and several deep breaths to settle her nerves before continuing. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Ren pointed at the ground on the other side of the tape and said, “My dad said there was an animal attack here

last night.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” the woman concurred.

“So, if it was an animal attack,” Ren began. “Why are all those cops in there on that side of the tape, and you’re out here on this side?”

The woman turned toward the kids and whispered, “Honestly, I don’t think this was an ordinary animal attack. The police won’t let me in because ‘it’s procedure.’ But there’s something about the way they say it. They’re hiding something, so I’ve been trying to listen to what they’re talking about in there. There’s something going on that’s, well, *abnormal*.”

Both of the kids gulped loudly, then Ren replied, “How abnormal?”

“From the bits and pieces I’ve been able to hear, the wounds on the body were caused by a very large, powerful animal. Something powerful enough to snap easily through bones in a single bite.”

The siblings winced and glanced at one another.

“However,” she continued. “There are no tracks leading to or from the body created by an animal large enough to do such a thing. Given the circumstances, you’d think the body was placed there after death, but it wasn’t. The police confirmed the evidence shows the man died right where they found him.”

Ren gulped again and asked, “Do they have any ideas about what might have happened?”

The woman shook her head. “No, but it gets even more bizarre. Did you hear the news about the animal attacks in Denton over the last few months?”

Ren’s eyes grew wide as she said, “My Dad was just telling us something about that.”

“There was something that wasn’t released to the media about those attacks,” said the woman, who continued,

“There are characteristics that make these attacks appear to be serial killings.”

“What?!” whispered Ren as she stepped closer to the woman to add, “I thought it was just an animal attack.”

“It is. It’s both,” the woman explained. “These attacks were definitely done by animals, but they attack the body the same way every time. First, the lower legs are bitten hard, the bones break. Once the victim falls to the ground, the sternum, that middle part where your ribs come together, it’s bitten away and the heart is removed.” The woman tapped her own sternum then made a motion as though ripping out her own heart.

Bo placed his hand on his own chest and furrowed his brow.

The woman continued, “Then the skull is bitten open and the brain is taken. But that’s it. The animal doesn’t do anything else to the body. It doesn’t eat any other part. Just the heart and the brain.”

“Seriously?” asked Ren.

“Seriously, and I think the police are trying to keep it quiet.”

“Really?” Ren pressed.

“Alright, kid, you’re killing me. You should get out of here before the police come over and call your parents. Now, go on.”

\*\*\*

At the house, the kids dumped their bikes in the garage and ran to the computer room.

“Daddy!” shouted Ren.

“Whoa there, Puddin’. What’s going on?” asked Trey as he turned with a look of concern.

“We went down to that place near Cravens Park

where that guy got attacked..."

Trey threw out a hand to interrupt her and said, "Wait! What? I thought I told you guys to stay out of trouble." He stood from his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

Ren shook her head and explained feverishly. "We didn't get into any trouble, but we did talk to a parks person." She recounted the conversation she'd had with the woman on the path but was again stopped by her father.

"Let's take it down a few notches," Trey began. "I think someone's been pulling your chain. Seriously, have you heard yourself? Serial-killing, no-footprint-leaving, brain-eating animals. That's like chupacabra-crazy talk."

"But it's *real*, Dad!" she insisted as she laced her fingers together below her chin.

Trey raised a skeptical brow and asked, "Is there any proof?"

"The body!" she exclaimed.

"The report in the news didn't say anything about the heart and brain being eaten."

Ren shook her head and added, "That's because they're keeping it a secret from the media. They don't want us to know about it."

"Ren, do you hear how crazy that sounds? Just stop and think about this for a minute. How exactly is this thing even supposed to walk around and not leave tracks? Unless it was flying, it had to leave tracks. Even squirrels and mice leave tracks."

"Dad! You're a genius!" she beamed, then turned to her brother with wide eyes and said, "It can fly! That's why it doesn't leave tracks. Let's go. I have an idea." She made a hasty exit, pulling her brother behind her through the door.

"Puddin'! No, I didn't mean..." Trey slumped in defeat. They were already gone. "D'oh, never mind."

\*\*\*

The kids scanned the books on the shelves, Ren taking the higher and Bo covering the lower. They had ridden their bikes to the public library. Questions needed answers and books had answers.

They piled the books they thought might have relevant information on one of the tables. They sorted through them and took notes on creatures that seemed to be likely prospects. The books sported titles like *Night Time Creatures*, *Predators of the Southwest*, *Legendary Creatures of America*, and *La Chupacabra*. They looked through books all afternoon. In the end, they couldn't identify any one creature that exhibited all of the characteristics of the mystery serial-killing animal. However, they did have a substantial list of suspects. With unsatisfied curiosity, the duo stuffed their notes into Bo's backpack and started home.

\*\*\*

As the kids approached the backside of their block, they saw their new neighbors arriving home again and sped up to meet them. "Brad! Hey, wait up!" shouted Ren.

He turned and waited as his roommates continued into the house.

Ren hadn't quite stopped her bike when she started talking. "Hey, guess what. Me and Bo are investigating a mystery!"

His eyes opened wide with interest and he asked, "Is that so?"

Ren nodded eagerly. "Yeah. A real live mystery, right here in our part of town."

"What kind of a mystery?" inquired Brad.

She shot eyes toward her brother, then to Brad, and

recounted again the conversation with the woman on the path.

Brad tilted his head and said, "That's interesting, but are you sure it qualifies as a mystery?"

Ren nodded. "Uh-huh. You see, the animal attacks are always the same. First, it breaks the legs with one powerful bite. Then it tears open the chest and eats the heart. Then, oh my gosh, it bites open the skull and eats the brain!"

"Hmm. That does sound like a mystery," Brad concurred.

Ren smiled broadly and continued, "I think we figured out why there are no tracks. It can fly." Ren lifted her chin smugly at her own brilliance, though her father had come up with the flying idea.

Brad chuckled and shook his head. "If you're going to be an investigator, you have to think more critically about your conclusions. Your mystery animal flies, right?"

Ren nodded, confidence waning. "Yeah."

"Well, if this creature is attacking from the sky, doesn't it stand to reason it would attack the upper body first? Your ranger friend said the animal always breaks the legs first. Unless all the victims were walking on their hands at the moment of the attack, I'd say it would be safe to assume your animal doesn't fly."

"Criminy, you're right!" exclaimed Ren as she turned toward her brother and added, "Let's take all of the flying animals off our list of possible suspects."

Nodding in agreement, Bo made a note and shoved it into his backpack with the rest of their research.

"OOH! I've got it, Bo! It's some sort of tunneling animal, like an oversized rabid gopher or groundhog. That's why there's no tracks, because it doesn't walk around on the ground. It just sticks its head out of the ground and bites."

“Um...” Brad interrupted. “Even if the gopher was rabid, it’s still not a carnivore. It might bite someone if they got too close, but I don’t think it would eat their heart and brain. I think if you really want to figure this out, you’re going to have to come at this from a different angle.”

Ren lowered her head and grumbled, “Maybe we need more time to think on this one. Come on, Bo. Let’s go get some dinner.”

\*\*\*

Brad turned and made his way into the house.

Joey paused in the entryway and asked, “What’s up with the kids?”

Brad closed the door behind himself as he replied, “They’re on the hunt.”

Joey arched a brow and pressed, “What for?”

“I think they’re still a bit confused on that point. Some of their ideas were — kind of out there,” Brad chuckled as he led Joey down toward the home office.

Joey grunted an acknowledgment. “Hm. Let’s hope they find what they’re looking for.”

## **Chapter 3**

### **A HISTORICAL CONNECTION**

Three weeks passed and, though Ren and her brother revisited their research many times, they had no new revelations regarding the animal attacks.

Trey had arranged to be away from work for a week. It was time for the annual drive to his grandfather's house, which he had put off until the final week before the new school year started. He had always thought of the house as his grandfather's, though he had been dead for several decades. His grandfather had passed the house to his father, who also died years ago. His father had passed the house to Carl, Trey's older brother, who kept the house for the sake of the family.

The two-story home sat atop a hill that looked down on the Guadalupe River, near San Antonio. Trey had many fond memories of running along the wraparound porch as a small boy and sneaking out from the second story to visit friends as a teen. When Trey pulled up in front of the house, the kids knew exactly what to do. As soon as the emergency brake came up, the kids bolted into the house and up the

stairs to their respective rooms where they changed clothes. By the time Trey had pulled the bags from the trunk and hauled them to the porch, the kids were running for the door in swim gear, each carrying an inner tube and a fishing pole. Trey stood back to allow them to rush past, down the hill toward the water.

Carl, a slightly shorter and chubbier version of Trey, poked his head through the doorway after the kids and asked, "Is the stampede gone?"

"Yeah, it's moved on down to the watering hole," replied Trey as he dropped the bags so he could hug his brother.

Carl took one of the bags from the porch and led Trey into the house. "I was wondering when you'd show up. Summer's almost over."

"Better late than never. Where are your boys?" asked Trey.

Carl continued through the house and up the stairs. "They went on a road trip down to Padre with the neighbor's boys. I expect they'll be home late Sunday night, just in time to get four or five hours of sleep before the first day of school."

At the top of the stairs, Trey opened one of the doors and dropped Ren's bags onto the floor. "How is it two big nerds like us grow up and have kids who aren't nerdy at all? How fair is that?"

He pulled Ren's door shut and shuffled down to his own room where he changed into swim gear to join the kids at the river. On his way out, he grabbed his own fishing pole and inner tube and ran headlong down the path. He shouted "Woo hoo!" as he leapt from the bank and landed with a big splash between his children.

Ren wiped her face and complained, "Dad! You're gonna scare away the fish!"

\*\*\*

After a couple of hours, the trio returned to the house with their catch.

Ren and Bo were the first ones in and out of the showers. As Ren dressed, one of her toes caught on a belt loop, causing her to lose her balance and fall against the back wall of the closet.

As she hit the wall, she had a sudden sensation of déjà vu. She had been in that closet many times throughout her childhood, but there was something about the feeling that seemed foreign, as though she remembered it from someone else's perspective.

She ran her hand along the wall and paused over one of the boards. After a moment, she pressed and it folded in on a spring-loaded hinge. She pushed it in a few more times, wondering why there would be such a board in the closet. Then she noticed, as she pushed in on the board, another board high on the wall popped out a little, exposing a red button. When she released the board, the red button was again hidden. Though she stretched as far as she could, she couldn't quite reach it. *Must — Push — Button*, she thought, then dressed in a rush and ran to Bo's room to pound on his door.

The door opened to reveal her brother with his shirt still around his neck and one arm through the sleeve. She grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him into her room.

"Bo, I found a secret red button!"

One eyebrow slowly drew into an arch on his forehead as he pulled his second arm through its sleeve.

Ren grabbed him by the elbow and dragged him into the closet. "Okay, climb on my shoulders," she urged as she bent down for him.

He took a step back and shot her the eyebrow again.

“Watch!” she exasperated as she pushed in the lower board with her toe, then pointed to the newly exposed button above their heads on the wall. “Alright? Now climb on my shoulders and push the button.”

Bo nodded, then scrambled onto his sister’s shoulders. When she pressed the lower board again, he pushed the button. They heard a sharp click and a panel in the sidewall of the closet slid open to reveal a ladder leading down to a lower level.

Ren bent a little and Bo jumped off. The two of them leaned into the now opened space. A ladder led down a dusty old shaft and from what they could tell from the little light that made it into the shaft, it skipped the first floor altogether.

Ren grabbed her brother by the upper arm and squeezed tightly. “So, what do you think?”

As usual, he remained silent but gave his sister a thumbs-up.

“We’re going to need a broom and a flashlight. I’ll go down and get the flashlight from the car. You go get a broom.” She left her brother to race downstairs and out the front to the car.

\*\*\*

Down in the kitchen, Bo saw his father and uncle cleaning the fish. Trying to avoid notice, Bo walked quietly along the wall toward the broom, which leaned against the side of the fridge. As he got within arm’s reach of the broom, Carl looked at him and asked, “Hey, Bo, you wanna help us clean?”

Bo clenched his jaw tightly, then replaced his grimace with a bright smile. He grabbed the broom and nodded,

making his way toward the door sweeping as he went. He pursed his lips together and blew, as though whistling a song, though no actual sound came out.

Carl looked sidelong at his brother and muttered, "That's not exactly what I meant, but okay."

Bo continued to sweep all the way through the door, then he bolted for the room.

\*\*\*

Ren returned from the car and joined him as he waited next to the closet. "Here, you take the flashlight. I'll sweep, you shine." She clicked it on as she handed it to him and took the broom. She twirled the broom ahead of her as she descended the ladder, catching as many of the cobwebs as she could manage.

The ladder ended in a dark room. Ren found a light-switch on the wall and flipped it. The walls were covered in newspaper clippings and dusty old shelves, and there was a desk covered with books and various baubles.

"This is so cool," whispered Ren as her eyes jumped from object to object around the room. "I wonder who put all this down here." Focusing on the newspaper articles, she noticed they were all dated from the nineteen forties and fifties.

"You know what, Bo? I bet all this stuff belonged to our great-grandfather, the one who gave Dad his lucky quarter. Ooh, speaking of which..." She pulled the quarter from her pocket. "I found it in the car. Here. Take a look."

Bo took it from his sister's open hand and inspected it closely. The date on the quarter read nineteen thirty-nine but didn't appear remarkable in any other way. He shoved it into his pocket and continued to inspect the room.

"Jeez, Bo, look at what's in these headlines. 'Fifth

Animal Attack in as Many Months.’ ‘Unknown Animal Attacks Drifter.’ ‘Another Shocking Animal Attack.’ Is it just me or do these headlines sound familiar?”

Bo bumped his sister’s elbow with a leather-bound journal.

“Huh? What’s that?” asked Ren as she took the journal from her brother. “Where’d you get this?”

He pointed to the desk where similar journals laid in a stack on the corner, next to a pair of dusty old-fashioned glasses and a feather quill pen.

She opened the journal and skimmed the first page. “Hey, this is great-grandpa’s journal. It looks like he’s writing about one of the attacks. Here, check this out.”

*June 15, 1946. I’m starting this journal to document a bizarre series of events that appear to be unfolding near my home here in San Antonio. For the last few months, there have been a series of animal attacks, which have led to the deaths of a number of people around the area. Details in the papers have been vague, but I think there is more to this than the papers would lead us to believe.*

*Last night I was out late with my friend Vern. We were walking home from a party when all of a sudden, it got real quiet. All the nighttime animals just shut up all at once. Then, like a flash, something came at us from out of the trees. It was dark and we didn’t get a good look at it. It attacked Vern. With just one bite, it broke his leg above his ankle. Then it ran back to the trees.*

*I could hear it moving, circling us in the tree-line. I picked up Vern and put his arm over*

*my shoulder so I could help him walk, but each time we started heading in any particular direction, the animal would cut us off. After a few minutes, it came in for another charge. I immediately dropped Vern and started throwing things at it and making a lot of noise to try to scare it off.*

*The first thing I threw was the bottle of Dr Pepper I had in my hand. I could tell I hit it squarely in the head, breaking the bottle, but it didn't slow down. It just kept coming. I scrambled on the ground and found a rock to throw, but the rock didn't stop it either. It bit Vern's other leg and broke it too, then it was back to the tree line. At this point, it was pretty obvious Vern wasn't going anywhere. He outweighs me by sixty pounds. I wasn't going to be able to carry him very far on my own.*

*So, I started reaching into my pockets to see if I had anything I might be able to defend him with. I normally carry my pocketknife with me, but to my dismay, when I pulled my hand out of my pocket, all there was to show for my effort was one lousy quarter. Just then the animal charged again, and with nothing left to do I let loose with the quarter. It hit him across his back and, for some reason, it collapsed and thrashed on the ground for a few seconds, making a terrible whining sound. Then it popped up on its feet and dashed off into the night. I went to where it fell to see if maybe it tripped in a gopher hole or something, but the only thing I found was my quarter glinting in the moonlight.*

*Me and Vern waited a few minutes to see if it was coming back, but we didn't get the feeling it was still anywhere nearby. I took Vern's hands and dragged him down the road as best as I could. We got lucky and a truck came by. We flagged him down and he gave us a ride to town. I've spent most of today going through old newspapers trying to find more information on these attacks. I've made a list of the families. I'm going to see if I can talk to any of them and hopefully find out more.*

*I stopped at a newsstand a little while ago. There was another attack last night, a couple of hours before dawn. Details in the newspaper were sparse. All they could confirm was that it was another animal attack and the fella didn't make it.*

Ren turned to her brother, unsure she could believe her own eyes, and said, "Did you hear that, Bo? It breaks the legs first!"

"Kids! It's time to eat!"

They heard their father calling them from the kitchen.

"Ah, this works! We just made our first big discovery. Okay, take the journal and go put it in your backpack. We'll read more after bedtime. Do the other journals on the desk have anything written in them?"

Bo thumbed through the pile of journals, but the pages were all blank. He shook his head.

"Alright, that's fine. Just take this one," she said.

The two hurried up the ladder and dusted themselves off in the closet before heading down. Bo stopped briefly in his room to shove the book into his bag.

## Chapter 4

### FAMILY SECRETS

The clock read one-thirty and everyone had already gone to bed. Everyone except for the young investigators. As planned, Bo brought his backpack with him as he crept down the hall and into his sister's room. Ren immediately ushered him into the closet where they could read aloud and not draw attention from the other end of the hall. She had already placed pillows on the floor so they could sit more comfortably.

Bo sat across from his sister on the floor of the closet. She took the book from him and immediately looked for the next entry.

*June 16, 1946. I went out today to track down anyone related to one of the previous attack victims. Vern is okay. He's got both of his legs in casts and he's decided to stay inside until further notice.*

*The first person I managed to track down was a woman named Stella. She's the*

*mother of the third victim. She was reluctant to talk to me at first. Thought I was a reporter. After I told her about what happened to me and Vern, she became more cooperative.*

*She said the police wouldn't tell her anything other than her son had been killed by some sort of an animal. They told her she should keep the details to herself and not to talk to reporters about it. After that, she had to confirm the identity of the body down at the morgue and, again, the police told her to keep the details of what she'd witnessed to herself. But seeing as I'm not a reporter and had been in a similar attack, she didn't see any harm in telling me.*

*Her son's body had two broken legs, each broken just above the ankle. The next part, well, let's just say I'm glad Vern and I were able to escape before it could happen to us. She said her son's chest and skull were both bitten wide open and that both the heart and brain were gone.*

*The animal didn't eat anything else. There were some bites on his arms and hands from where he tried to defend himself, but none of the flesh of his arms and hands appeared to have been eaten. I found two more people after that. A man named Bert and another woman named Francis. They were the next of kin of victims two and four. Their stories were pretty much the same as Stella's.*

Ren lowered the book into her lap and said, "They were having the same problem we are more than..." She

looked at her hand and moved her mouth silently as she raised her fingers one by one, “More than sixty years ago. It was exactly the same then as it is now. Same everything. Even the police are still trying to cover it up.”

She brought the book back up and continued reading. Skimming ahead through the pages, she muttered to herself as she tried to find anything of use. “Aha! I think I found something!”

*August 13, 1946. Vern got out of his casts one week ago. Last night, he died. His cousin said they were up late and Vern had to go out to the truck to get a wrench. The cousin said they were trying to fix the sink. Vern went out for the wrench and never came back. He found him in the morning, out by the shed. His legs were broken again and his heart and brain were gone. Whatever it was that attacked us the first time came back to finish the job. Last night was the first night Vern had gone outside alone after dark since the first attack. I'm starting to believe these animal attacks are not random.*

Ren stopped to take a long, measured breath and said, “Bo, this investigation is getting really scary. Dang it. Now we can't stop investigating it because we know there's something out there killing people and it's not just random animal attacks. There's got to be some sort of a connection here and we need to find it!”

Though visibly shaken, Bo tried to keep his cool. He nodded and pointed to the book.

She continued to read, but as the night wore on, they didn't uncover anything new. Just more of the same. The

journal entries stopped early in the spring of nineteen forty-seven and so, apparently, did the attacks in the area. The last entry said that during a trip down to Houston, their great-grandfather found an article in the newspaper about a couple of unusual animal attacks.

Ren furrowed her brow and muttered, “Hmm, this is kind of weird. The animal attacks around his hometown stopped right as new attacks started in Houston. The way it’s written, it looks like he’s going to follow a new lead, but then his handwriting gets sloppy and he says he needs ‘spiritual insight’ before he can continue. I guess he never received his insight. All the other journals were blank. Maybe he just got too busy with his family and thought it would be best to let it go.”

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Throughout the week, the kids took part in family activities during the day and at night had secret meetings where they would revisit the journal and the articles on the walls in their great-grandfather’s hidden study. They didn’t discover any new breakthroughs, but they did have a lot of fun and at the end of the week it was time to return home. On the long drive, Ren would whisper theories to Bo, who would give it all careful consideration. Their father would occasionally shout, “Hey, what are you kids going on about back there?” To which Ren always replied, “Nothing, Daddy.”

Once they were home, the siblings wanted to share what they had found with Brad. They didn’t think it would be a good idea to share much more with their father. He would probably tell them it was too dangerous and forbid them to look into it any further. So, they told him they were going for a bike ride to stretch out their legs after the long trip.

The bike ride only went as far as the other side of the

block. They ditched the bikes on the front lawn of Brad's house and rang the bell. They heard muffled voices on the other side of the door, then it opened just a crack to reveal Lan's eye peering down from high above.

"Hey, how you guys doin'?"

"Oh, we're fine," Ren began. "We've got some *really* exciting news about that mystery we were investigating, the one about the animal attacks."

"Is that so?" asked Lan. He pulled the door wide enough to stand in and placed his ping-pong paddle-sized palm against the door frame to pad his head from bumping the wooden crossbeam.

"Yeah. *Really* exciting. Is Brad home?"

"Yes, but he's not feeling so good today," said Lan with a look of disappointment, an indication he would not be able to let them in.

Ren bit her lip and looked up hopefully. "Do you think he's well enough to see us just for a few minutes?"

"Mmm. I don't..."

"It's okay, Lan." Brad interrupted from further within the house. "Let 'em in."

Lan backed away from the door and ushered them into the living room.

Thick drapes were drawn on every window, allowing only dim light to permeate the home. They also noticed someone wore way too much aftershave.

Brad sat in a chair, hidden in shadow in the corner of the front room. "I hope you don't mind, but we had to block out the windows. I'm having a bad patch with my migraines right now. The light makes my head hurt."

"We don't mind. Sometimes Dad gets migraines if he gets too much caffeine the day before."

"So, you say you've got some exciting news," said Brad.

“Very!” Ren clasped her hands together and restrained herself from bobbing up and down.

Bo gave an enthusiastic thumbs-up in agreement.

That’s when they noticed Brad was covered in sores and bandages again, like the first night they had seen him over the fence. Bo elbowed Ren and leaned in as though to whisper something to her but didn’t actually make any sound.

Ren looked concernedly at Brad before continuing. “Are you sure you’re okay enough to see us today? You look like you might need medical attention.”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine by tomorrow. You’ll see. I’ve had my meds. I’m just waiting for them to kick in.”

“Okay, if you say so. Anyway, me and Bo went down to our great-grandfather’s house down near San Antonio and we found an awesome hidden passageway that leads down to a secret room where he kept a journal and a bunch of research stuff. It just so happens that these unusual animal attacks we’ve been having here and now have been going on since the nineteen forties.”

“Really? That’s a long time.” Brad’s voice held a note of genuine interest, though he remained perfectly still as he sat in his chair.

“I know, right?!” agreed Ren. “So, we were going through his old journal. In it, he said his friend Vern was attacked, but great-grandpa was there and managed to save him by throwing his lucky quarter at the — thing. It was too dark for them to get a good look at it, but before it ran off, it broke both of Vern’s legs. Then, two months later Vern goes outside late at night and he gets attacked again. Unfortunately, he was alone and it killed him that time.”

“So, you think the animal knew who Vern was and specifically went after him,” said Brad.

Ren looked briefly at her silent brother before turning

back to their host to say, “Yeah. Isn’t that crazy?”

“That is kind of crazy,” concurred Brad, who added, “Wild animals don’t do that sort of thing. Which means —. Come on now. Use your brain, Ren. If wild animals don’t do that...”

With a stunned look, Ren exhaled her words, “Then these attacks aren’t being done by wild animals.”

“Now *that* is an exciting discovery, good job. Now, continue your line of thinking. If these aren’t wild animals, then...” Brad worked his index finger in a circular motion to coax an answer from Ren.

“Then the animals are being trained and controlled by someone and this really is a case of serial killing.”

Brad stopped working his finger and allowed it to return to rest on the arm of the chair. “My guess is that this is why the police have been trying to keep the details out of the media. They don’t want people to panic and they don’t want to tip off the mastermind that they’re on to him. Now, this is where the real detective work starts. Serial killings all have commonalities that tie them together. You already know how the victims are killed. If you can figure out why they are killed that way and why those victims are selected, you may be able to figure out who is behind it. Alright, now off you go.”

Ren nodded and started shuffling toward the door as she said, “Thanks. We’ll see what we can find out.”

“You’re welcome and thank you, Ren. You give me hope.”

She furrowed her brow, not sure how to take that particular compliment. “Um, thanks?”

## Chapter 5

### BEHOLD, THE POWER OF THE INTERNET

Ren and Bo sat at the computer with their notes and research materials spread out next to them. They watched as the cursor blinked in the search window, unsure of what to enter.

“Alrighty, we need to find out why the victims are killed the way they are and how they’re selected.”

Bo nodded in agreement.

“Let’s look up eating the heart and brain and see what we come up with.”

Again, a solid nod of agreement from Bo as he entered “eating a heart.” The search results came back with Healthy Eating; Eat Your Heart Out; Heart Disease; Eating a Heart-Healthy Diet.

“Well, that was no good. Try ‘eating a brain’.”

He typed and the results came back: 6 Die From Brain-Eating Amoeba; Brain Tumor Society; Eating Enough Brain Foods?; Protect Yourself Against Zombies.

“Unless our killer is a microbe, cancer, malnutrition, or the undead, we’re out of luck with that search too. Let’s try

another one. How about ‘heart eater’?”

Bo shrugged and typed in the search. The first heading that came up grabbed their attention: These Creatures Feed on the Human Heart...

“Ooh! That one! Click it!”

He clicked the link, which took them to a site dedicated to mythological creatures.

Ren read the text:

*Many believe the legend of the werewolf to be based in fact. Although seldom reported today, it was just a few centuries ago they were commonly feared to have plagued the world. As a feature of their curse, these creatures are said to feed on the human heart. It is this hunger that drives them to kill, as the human heart is the only food that will satisfy them when they are transformed by the full moon.*

*Though there are many claims on what a transformed werewolf looks like, some theories are more dramatic than others. Some argue the transformation is very minor, causing a moderate amount of fur to grow along with larger canine teeth. Others believe a man might turn into a wolf entirely. While many others say it’s somewhere in between, perhaps more like a wolf that stands on two feet.*

Ren chewed at the corner of her mouth, then turned to her brother and said, “Well, that fits with eating the hearts, but a big creature like a werewolf would leave big footprints and the park ranger told us there were no footprints found near the body big enough. Hold on! What was the date of the last attack here?”

Bo pulled up one of his notes and pointed to a date on the page.

She looked at the date and said, "Google *Full Moon Chart* for me."

He found the page and searched for the day: *Full Moon*.

She grabbed the journal and looked for the date of the first entry, "The first entry is June 15, 1946, but the attack was the night before. Look up June 14, 1946."

Again, he searched the chart: *Full Moon*.

"Criminy! What was the date Vern got attacked the second time...?" Ren flipped frantically through the pages. "Okay, the date of that entry was August 13, so the night before was August 12."

He keyed it in. August 12: *Full Moon*.

She covered her mouth with both hands as she looked at the computer screen.

Bo typed one more date. Today: *Full Moon*.

"Okay, this doesn't necessarily mean the serial killer is a werewolf," she said, attempting to convince herself. "Maybe the guy just likes working on the full moon, or perhaps he's crazy and thinks he's a werewolf. He doesn't *have* to be a werewolf, right? Besides, we still haven't determined why there are no footprints large enough to belong to a large predator. If it really was a werewolf, wouldn't there be big hairy werewolf footprints? And what about the brains? Werewolves don't eat brains! Okay, I can't take any more of this today. I need a smoothie."

As she headed off to the kitchen, Bo packed their research materials and turned off the computer. On the way to his room, he felt inside his pocket to make sure he still had his great-grandfather's lucky quarter. Ever since Ren had passed it to him in the study, he kept it with him all the time, even in the bathtub. Once he had everything squared

away in his room, he met his sister in the kitchen. The two of them sat quietly and watched the sunset on their neighborhood, afraid that when morning came, they would find a story in the news about another attack.

“Hey, what are you kids doing?!” Trey shouted as he sneaked into the room.

Ren screamed as both kids spun around, wide-eyed and clutching at each other.

Trey laughed and opened the pantry door. “I totally got you guys!”

“Oh, my gosh, Dad!” Ren placed a palm on her forehead and tried to catch her breath, then added, “You scared us half to death.”

Trey grinned and pulled a box of noodles from a shelf. “I’ve got skills. Are you guys hungry? I’m making spaghetti tonight.”

“Super-sketti?” asked Ren.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“We’re in!” she cheered as she raised her fists above her head.

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Despite her best efforts, Ren lay in her bed that night, unable to sleep. Through her open window, she watched the full moon in the sky and listened to the sounds of the night. Sometime near midnight, she started to doze off. Her transition to sleep was disturbed by barking coming from Brad’s house. A minute later, she heard him shout orders at the dogs in that odd language. The dogs fell silent, then she heard the heavy latch open for the side gate.

With the dogs gone, the neighborhood fell silent again and Ren drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 6

### FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

The morning was hectic for the first day of school. After scarfing down breakfast, Ren cycled through four outfits, trying to pick the right one to set the stage for her eleventh-grade year.

Neither she nor Bo had an opportunity to check the news to find out what, if anything, had happened the previous night. Anytime they tried to boot the computer, their father would swoop in and power it down.

\*\*\*

As they made their way to school, Trey offered his children some fatherly advice. “Alright, guys, you be good at school today. Pay attention to your teachers...”

“We know, Dad. We’ve been to school before, ya know. We’re not little kids anymore. Heck, I’ve been wearing a bra for the last six years.”

“*Ugh!*” Trey groaned. “Don’t remind me. If I think about that stuff too much, I start to have nightmares about

boys climbing up to your window at night. Why can't you just stay my sweet little girl forever? You used to be such a sweet little angel. Now, look at you! When you get home today, we're gonna try squishing you again to see if you'll turn back into a baby."

Ren shook her fist at her father and insisted, "Squishing never works, Dad. Besides, you know I'm still your little girl."

"I know, but it's fun to try. Okay, here we are! I'll be back at three to pick you up. You be good," said Trey.

"I always am. Bye!" Ren jumped out and waved.

Trey rolled down the window and shouted, "I love you!"

She turned as she walked, mouthing back, "I love you too." Then she made motions to shoo him away before he got out of hand.

"I said I love you!" Trey continued.

Bo placed his face between his palms and shook his head.

Still walking, Ren turned again, this time with a scowl. She shouted back a quick, "I love you too!" Again, she attempted to shoo him away with one hand as the other hand pointed two fingers at her own eyes, then to her father.

Louder again this time, as she approached the door, he shouted. "I SAID I LOVE YA, GIRL!"

This time she tucked her head and ignored him as she entered the building.

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Trey did the same thing every year on the first day of school. He tried to give Bo the same treatment at the junior high, but he ran too quickly. By the time he lowered his window enough to stick his head through, Bo had already

gone through the door.

He took a moment to watch Bo enter the building, then rolled the window up and pulled out of the drop-off lane. As he drove on, he thought about the comment Ren had made about wearing a bra. He realized he was rapidly approaching the end of an era. Soon they wouldn't be kids anymore. One much sooner than the other. The weight of that reality brought tears to his eyes. "Look at me, crying like an idiot." Trey wiped his eyes and pulled out of the school parking lot.

\*\*\*

Ren spent most of her free time between classes reconnecting with the friends she'd lost contact with over the summer. She'd spent the last few weeks wishing she had more people with whom to discuss the mystery, but now that they were here, she found herself reluctant to let them in on the secret.

Would they think she was a nut-case? Would they believe her and insist that she allow them to help in the investigation? Would they tell someone she didn't want to know and bring unwanted trouble? She wanted desperately to share the secret with someone else but somehow knew that was a bad idea. For now, the secret would have to remain between herself, her brother, and the neighbors on the backside of the block.

Perhaps she would be able to share the secret when the mystery had been solved and the threat of a gruesome death at the hands of a serial killer was no longer looming over her community. Until then, she'd just have to take a page out of her brother's book and learn to keep her mouth shut.

\*\*\*

Gym class started with a series of races. As usual, Bo won every race.

Tall for his age, the new kid, Lucky, didn't appreciate getting shown up by Bo, who didn't even stand as high as his shoulder.

Near the end of class, the coach's assistant called him away. Lucky saw an opportunity and wasted no time. He snuck up behind Bo and shoved him hard, nearly knocking him onto his face on the gym floor.

Luckily for Bo, his friend Bubba had gym that hour as well.

"Hey! What's your problem?" Bubba demanded. Though smaller than Lucky, Bubba had a solid build and carried himself with confidence. "If you think you have something to prove, then do it? You've already shown us you can shove a guy half your size when he's not looking. Way to go, setting a high bar for yourself. We're all super impressed." He rolled his eyes, smirked at the gathering crowd, then turned back to Lucky and added, "Now, how about we raise that bar? You're not afraid of a little challenge, are you?"

"I ain't afraid of nothin'. Wha'choo got?" asked Lucky.

"First one to run to the far side of the gym and back, climb sideways across the rock climbing walls, and make it to the top of the ropes wins. If you fall off the wall on your way across, you have to start over. Loser shuts his face for the rest of the year. Winner gets bragging rights. So, are you man enough to take on the smallest kid in the class?" taunted Bubba.

Lucky fumed and pressed his lips tightly together.

Bo looked at Lucky with contempt, slowly raising a brow, to call him out.

Lucky scowled back. "Fine, let's do it."

\*\*\*

The two stood, each with one foot against the back wall of the gym in the ready position.

Bubba stood between them, arms held high. "On your mark, get set, *go!*"

They took off in a flash. As predicted, Bo quickly took the lead. He was a full four yards ahead of his opponent when he turned around at the wall. By the time he returned to the starting wall, the gap had increased to eight yards. He darted right, to the rock-climbing wall.

When Lucky finally made it all the way back, he dashed left, to the mirror of Bo's wall. Even though he started the wall after Bo, it didn't take him long to catch up, thanks to his reach advantage.

While Lucky may have had a longer reach, Bo had the advantage of knowing the course. He had climbed the wall dozens of times and knew how to move to get across it quickly and with little effort.

Like rival spiders, the two climbed sideways across the walls, both ending at the same time. As their feet hit the ground, they stopped briefly to glare across the gym at one another, then the two raced to the ropes.

Lucky jumped as high as he could to get a lead on Bo. After several swift pulls, he was already halfway up.

Bo looked at Lucky as he jumped onto the rope. Lucky's movements had become sluggish and clumsy. Bo knew the secret to rock climbing was to use the strength of his legs to move him and only use his arms to guide. So, as Bo ascended the rope, his arms were still fresh.

Two-thirds of the way up, Lucky looked over to see Bo had caught up.

Bo paused a moment to send Lucky a rude gesture, then with surprising speed, closed the distance to the top.

The class cheered as Bo slid down the rope.

As soon as he hit the ground, Bubba lifted him onto his shoulders and marched him around the gym until Coach returned to call the class to order.

As class let out, Bo and Bubba walked together out of the gym.

Lucky bumped into them as he passed and said, "This ain't over."

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Trey picked up Ren then Bo as their respective schools let out for the day. "So, how was school?" he asked.

Ren shrugged. "Good."

"That's it? Just good?"

She nodded. "Yep, that's it. How was your day, Bo?"

He grinned toothily with wide eyes and gave two thumbs-up.

Trey shifted the car into drive. "Wow, that must have been some day."

\*\*\*

At the house, the kids dropped their backpacks on the table and raced to the office. Bo booted the computer and opened a local news page. The top headline read *Second Animal Attack Victim Found, This Time in Graveyard*.

"That's it! Click it," said Ren.

He clicked and the full article loaded.

"Crap," she gasped. "We were right."

From the other room, the kids heard their father shout. "Are you doing your homework?!"

“Dang it, Bo. It’s always right when we make a discovery. Okay, let’s put that name in our notes for now. We’ll finish our homework and then we’ll go ask Brad if he can help us find stuff on this Peter guy.”

“I don’t hear homework!” Trey pressed.

“Okay, okay! We’re doing it!” replied Ren.

“That’s better! Love you guys!”

## Chapter 7

### VAN WIES

With their homework behind them, the two would-be investigators grabbed their research materials and rushed around the block to Brad's house. When the door opened, they found the drapes that had been drawn to block out the sun the day before now open. They also saw Brad, who looked much better.

"Hey there. How's your investigation coming along?" asked Brad.

A worried look flashed across Ren's face as she glanced down to Bo. "Disturbingly," she replied.

"Ooh, that's promising. Sounds like you discovered something you didn't want to know." Brad stepped back from the door to let them enter.

"You ain't kiddin'," agreed Ren, who continued, "But I don't think I want to talk about that part of the investigation right now. You'd probably think me and Bo were crazy if we told you our theory at this point. What we do want to talk about is Peter Van Wies."

"So, you've heard the news then? It just so happens I

already have a file on Mr. Van Wies. I was hired three weeks ago by his wife, Martha, to find out where he sneaks off to on the weekends. He told her he liked to go out with his golfing and poker buddies. Anyway, long story short, she got suspicious and called me in on the case.”

Ren clenched her fists, attempting to control her excitement. “That’s awesome. So, what do you know about him?”

Brad led them to the den, where the three of them sat across from one another. “Well, he’s loaded for one thing. He inherited a plastics company from his father twenty years ago. When he did, he hired all the right brains to come up with innovative products. Now, his company owns some very profitable patents.”

“Do you know why he might have been in the cemetery where they found his body?” asked Ren.

“That’s where his parents are buried. It was twenty years yesterday when his parents died and he inherited the family business.”

Ren ran her fingers through her hair as she contemplated the likelihood of such an event. “Wow, what a coincidence, twenty years to the day. Did you find out how his parents died?”

“They were working together on a new kind of plastic in a lab. The records were sketchy, but there was apparently some sort of accident. They ended up breathing in toxic fumes and didn’t realize it until it was too late.”

“How sad,” whispered Ren.

“That isn’t the only tragedy in Mr. Van Wies’ history,” Brad continued. “His plant has had two more deaths over the last twenty years, both of which have been classified as industrial accidents. However, there was something very suspicious about the timing of those deaths.”

Bo let out a short, hard breath through his nose and

raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Brad continued. "From what I could gather on the other deaths, there were some shady dealings that magically went away after the accidents at the plant."

"Ugh," Ren groaned. "Sounds like Mr. Van Wies might not have been such a nice guy."

Brad smiled and said, "Yeah, not so much."

"So, what did you find out for Mrs. Van Wies? Where had he been going on the weekends?" asked Ren.

"Oh, that, yeah. He was fooling around with one of the female scientists from his lab. Which, on its own is a terrible thing, but considering all the other stuff we're finding out about him, I think *fooling around* would probably be the least of Mrs. Van Wies' problems."

"No joke," agreed Ren.

"Okay. You know about Peter Van Wies. Now, we need to know what he has in common with the other victims," explained Brad. "I made a list of the victims from here and from Denton, but I haven't done any research on them individually at this point."

Ren turned to her brother and said, "Bo, write down a list of the victims from the journal and newspaper clippings we brought back from vacation. We'll need to research those names too."

With a quick salute, Bo dove into his bag and pulled out the journal, as well as several pages of notes and made a list.

As he wrote, Ren's eyes wandered around the room. She saw Lan in the computer room, playing games. The third roommate was nowhere to be seen. "No Joey today?"

"He's at the office getting a head start on some cases that came in over the weekend."

Ren tapped her fingers lightly on her thigh and asked, "So, is it a lot of work being a private investigator?"

“It’s not as much work as it used to be thanks to the internet. There’s so much of what we do every day that’s kept in online records or stored in temp files on your computer. Say a wife wants to know if her husband is cheating. A quick look on most PCs gives me everything I need to know. Chat logs, emails, websites that explicitly demonstrate a relationship are easy to find. Some people are getting smarter though. You can get software that cleans up after you so you don’t leave that stuff behind, but most people don’t think to use it even when they’re trying to hide what they’re doing. There’s also software I have that allows me to do a background search on just about anyone. Saves me a lot of time.”

Ren hesitated a moment, then asked, “Do you ever carry a gun?”

“Me? Nah. It’s been ages since I’ve felt like I was in any real danger. Besides, I normally hang out with Lan. Could you imagine anyone trying to give me grief with Lan standing next to me?”

Ren chuckled, “Maybe someone who’s looking for a reason to visit their dentist.” She turned toward Bo to see him shaking his head.

Brad snickered in agreement. “Seriously, right? Anyway, thanks for the list, Bo. You two go on home for now. Lan and I have to head to the office for a while. Maybe we can talk next week? I’ll need a little time to find out more about the people on this list. Maybe then we can figure out why these people were selected.”

“Oh, alright. I guess we should head home for dinner anyway.” She stood and made for the door, motioning for her brother to follow.

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On her bed, Ren lay on her belly with her feet in the air. Her brother sat in the chair next to the window looking out at the waning moon.

“Bo, what do you think Brad would say if we told him we thought the victims may have all been killed by a werewolf?”

With eyebrows raised, one slightly higher than the other, he shrugged apologetically.

“I know what you mean. What would anyone think? This is crazy, right? No one really believes in werewolves. There’s no such thing as magical creatures. If there was, there would be some sort of evidence. There’s always a TV special, especially around October, about monsters and their origins and people who claim they’re real, but they don’t ever show any actual proof. If they were real and they really wanted us to know about them, we would have something by now.”

Bo rubbed his eyes as he rose from the chair. After a long stretch, he shuffled to the door, giving his sister a half-hearted wave goodnight.

She watched him leave, thinking about the day’s events and all they had learned. It seemed impossible, but it all unfolded right before her eyes. It was becoming difficult to know what to believe anymore.

## Chapter 8

### DID YOU SEE THAT?

During art class on Tuesday of the second week of school, a relentless Lucky did everything he could to torment Bo. Every time Bo managed to get his clay into a workable cup shape, Lucky did something to cause it to fall apart. The first time, he stomped Bo's foot on the pedal, which caused the pottery wheel to rev and sent the cup spinning off wildly. The second time, he *accidentally* nudged another student who fell and landed on Bo's wheel. The third time is where it got ugly. Lucky shoved Bo's face into the clay.

Bo pulled the lump of clay from his face and fired it right at the zipper of Lucky's pants.

Lucky doubled over and held his breath, cutting short a whimper.

Then, as though nothing had happened, Bo grabbed another piece of clay and kneaded it briefly at his table. Due to past experience with bullies, he had a good idea of what he might expect next. Though he didn't knead it as long as he should have, he placed the clay on his wheel and started spinning it.

Lucky managed to get up and rounded the table to confront Bo again.

“You think you can just do that and walk away?” Lucky fumed and reached for Bo’s latest piece of clay to squish it against the wheel as he continued, “Son, I’m about to...”

Lucky screamed in pain and released the lump of clay, which dangled for a moment, then fell to the floor. Blood trickled from Lucky’s hand. The sharp pencil Bo had hidden in the center of the clay didn’t go all the way through his palm, but it went deep enough to catch his attention.

That’s when Mr. Long stepped in. “What the heck is going on here?! Lucky, you go down to the nurse’s office. Bo, I’ll see you after class.”

Lucky grabbed a handful of paper towels and headed out the door. As he did, Bubba spoke up in defense of his friend.

“Mr. Long,” Bubba interjected. “Lucky’s been picking on Bo all day. This time, I guess he thought it would be funny to sneak up on him and squish his project. It’s just too bad he didn’t notice Bo was making a pencil holder. Bo had just put in the pencil to test it when Lucky snuck up. I guess his prank backfired on him.”

Looking down at the squished piece of clay with a bloody pencil tip sticking out of it, Mr. Long turned to Bo and asked, “Is that right? Is that what happened?”

With a look of wide-eyed innocence, Bo nodded in agreement and pointed to the clay on his face as evidence of his mistreatment.

“Alright. I’ll let it go this time, but I won’t tolerate bullying *or* fighting in my classroom. Next time Lucky tries anything, you tell me and I’ll take care of him. I don’t want any more blood in here. This is art, not biology!” Mr. Long turned to the class and grumbled, “Show’s over everyone.

Back to your wheels!”

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Three blocks north, Ren and her friends made their way to the high school parking lot on their way to lunch. Hannah and her boyfriend Pete walked hand in hand in front of Ren and Ashley. Hannah stood over six feet tall with an athletic build, the not-so-secret-weapon of her basketball team.

Though Hannah stood five inches taller than her boyfriend Pete, he never seemed to care. He wore dark glasses and carried a red and white striped cane, which he swept along the ground as he walked. Pete was born blind, so he could never see Hannah play, but he always cheered her on from the bleachers anyway. When he was younger, kids used to tease him with Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles jokes, but they stopped when they saw they could never get a rise out of him. His extreme confidence was one of the things that had attracted Hanna to him.

Ashley looked like Ren’s polar opposite, with a round face and small round nose. In addition, her blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes served as a stark contrast to her counterpart.

As the four climbed into the convertible VW Bug, Hannah turned the ignition and let the top down. By the time they got out of the parking lot, they only had forty-five minutes to grab lunch from Mucho Bueno and get back in time for their next class.

Pete removed his glasses and waved his arms in the air to feel the wind rushing over the car. “I tell you what, guys, I’m so glad I have a girlfriend with a convertible.”

Ashley threw her arms up as well and agreed, “*Yeah*. Convertibles are awesome.”

Pete put his glasses back on his face before he turned in his seat to face Ashley and Ren in the back. "It's more than that for me. Yeah, it's fun, but that's not it. I can't stand to be sealed up inside a car hurtling through space."

"Baby, you're just as blind with the top up or down. Why does it matter?" chuckled Hannah.

"For me, there's a huge difference between top down and top up. It's like, how can I put this? How would you like it if you had to ride in the trunk of the car?" asked Pete as he pointed to the trunk.

Hannah smirked and said, "In *this* car? Have you seen the trunk space?"

"Regardless of space, how would you feel about riding in the trunk?" asked Pete.

"I guess it would be pretty lame," Hannah admitted.

"Why?" pressed Pete.

"Because you're all cooped up, you can't see anything. It's probably hard to breathe," she explained.

Pete nodded and made exaggerated gestures. "Exactly! That's what it's like for me in a regular enclosed car. I have to see with my ears and with the windows and top up, the world literally ends twelve inches from my right, three feet forward, and four feet to my left. I don't like it. With the top and windows down, I can hear things in every direction. I know the world is still out there."

"Wow," said Ren as she leaned forward. "I never really thought about it like that. When you describe it that way, it does sound pretty bad. You must hate the winter."

"No," Pete chuckled and turned to Ren. "My mom hates winter. I make her drive with the windows open."

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After school, Hannah dropped Ren in front of the

junior high on her way home. Ren liked to wait for Bo and the two of them would walk the rest of the way home together. Today, however, the two didn't head directly home. They decided to stop at Brad's. It had been a week already and they were wondering if he had made any headway.

Joey let them in this time, but Brad wasn't home. "He's still at the office with Lan," said Joey. "They should be back soon if you want to stick around. The kitchen's at the end of the hall." He pointed down the hall to the left and suggested, "I just made some pinwheels, if you're hungry."

Ren licked her lips and placed a hand on her belly. "That sounds fantastic. I'd love some."

"Well, help yourself. I've already had a few and I need to work on some client-related matters so I'll leave them to you." He pointed again, "End of the hall," then turned and strode the other way.

"Thanks! Come on, Bo. I can hear your stomach already."

As the two of them passed through the house, Ren noticed antiques and artifacts decorating the walls and shelves. She had been in the homes of other bachelors before, friends of her father's. Most had only sparse decorations if any. The entertainment system always served as the centerpiece, but that was nowhere to be found here.

The large mirror on the wall of the hallway caught Ren's attention. The thick wooden frame was intricately carved, beautifully varnished, and there was something about the way it cast its reflection. The colors reflected in the mirror seemed richer and for a moment Ren saw something unexpected.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

Bo looked up, but after a quick inspection of the mirror, he simply shrugged.

"It was like for a second my reflection changed. It was

still me, but my clothes were different. They were white and silver, there was some kind of a golden laurel on my head and something over my eyes.” She peeked behind the frame. “Maybe this is one-way glass and there’s something behind it that got lit up. Hmm, no. There’s a solid wall behind it and a solid backing on the mirror. What the heck?”

Bo exhaled sharply and pushed his sister down the hall toward the pinwheels.

“That was so weird. Maybe I’ve just got low blood sugar. I’m sure I’ll be fine after a snack.”

Twenty minutes went by before they heard Brad and Lan coming in from the garage. Ren and Bo saw them at the other end of the house as they looked down the hall. Joey met them as they came in. They spoke in low tones before splitting up. Joey and Lan went into the back room and Brad made his way down the hall to the kitchen. “How do you guys like those pinwheels?” he asked.

Ren smiled and held up a toothpick. “They’re great. Joey should open a pinwheel store if this investigator gig ever dries up.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know. I suppose you guys are curious about what I may have discovered about the other victims.”

“Very,” agreed Ren.

“I haven’t been able to track down info on any of the cases from the nineteen-forties, but I’ve got info on about half of the cases from today. So far, there has been one very common theme. They all either committed or were suspected of terrible crimes. For example, six months ago, near Denton. The victim was Burt Rodin.”

“Write that down,” whispered Ren to her brother.

“Burt ran a meth lab. His *employees* were mostly teenage girls who made deals with coyotes to get across the border. The girls were then forced to work for Burt in

exchange as indentured servants.”

Ren stopped him with a raised hand. “Um — one sec. I’m confused. Coyotes? Like Wile E.?”

“No,” Brad chuckled. “Not like the animal. That’s the term used for a smuggler who brings people into the country from Mexico illegally.”

“Ah. Coyote. Okay, go on,” urged Ren.

“Like I was saying, indentured servants. By the time these girls were done cooking meth in his lab, their lungs were destroyed by the fumes. Imagine being one of these girls on the day your service is over. He dumps you on the street, severely ill from the lung damage. You’re hooked on meth just from the constant daily contact, you’re penniless and you have nowhere to go. Many of them died. Very few went on to live happy productive lives. He didn’t kill anyone directly, but he sure didn’t do anyone any favors. Anyway, this is what you get when you force manufacturing into the black market,” Brad explained.

Ren looked ill and placed her fingers over her mouth. “My gosh, that’s awful. Well, I guess I don’t feel so bad about him getting eaten. Are the rest like that?”

“Every one of them. The truth was harder to uncover on some of them, but there’s always some tie to tragedy. Take Troy Blair. He was the first victim here in Arlington. He was a long-standing and well-respected member of the community, organized charity events, served on the PTA for all his kids when they were in school. No one thought anything bad about Troy. That is, until two weeks after his funeral, when they found his journal. According to his journal, he liked to go on hunting trips and, to be fair, he was hunting. The thing is, he wasn’t hunting — animals.”

“You mean...” whispered Ren.

Brad nodded in grim agreement. “Uh-huh. He hunted people: men, women, children. He didn’t discriminate.”

“Criminy!” exclaimed Ren. “What the heck is this world coming to? I guess I don’t feel so bad for that guy either.”

“It’s not my place to tell you how you should or shouldn’t feel,” Brad asserted. “But so far, I don’t feel any sympathy for any of these guys either.”

Ren took a moment to look at her brother before turning to their host and said, “I’m almost afraid to ask. What about my great-grandpa’s friend?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’ll make sure to look him up. All of this is probably quite a shock. I don’t want to tell you any more until you’ve had time to digest the information and come to some conclusions on your own. The guys and I are headed down to San Antonio for a couple of weeks on a case anyway, so we’ll be able to look up some stuff for you while we’re there. Come back on Wednesday in two weeks.”

Ren shot to her feet and said, “That’ll leave less than a week until the next attack.”

“Huh? What makes you think that?” asked Brad.

“Something me and Bo noticed during our investigation. The dates of the attacks all fall on full moons.”

“Wow. That’s fantastic. You’re further along than I thought you would be.” said Brad.

She looked down, trying to hide the tremendous satisfaction she felt from his compliment, and said, “Thanks. We’ve been working really hard to be logical and stuff.”

“Well, good job — and stuff.”

## Chapter 9

### A ROUGH DAY

The night before Brad and his team returned from San Antonio, Ren looked at Brad's house through her bedroom window. Something playing in her mind kept bringing her back to that moment in front of the mirror in Brad's hallway. What did she *really* see in her reflection? The thought became a compulsion.

Unable to resist, Ren opened her window and leapt out onto the grass in the backyard. The drop from the second floor didn't faze her as she picked herself up and climbed the fence into Brad's yard. As she approached the backdoor, she saw it was already open a crack. She thought, *What if he's being robbed right now?* In the end, curiosity about the mirror trumped common sense about the door.

She stepped into the kitchen, where just two weeks ago she and Bo had eaten pinwheels. The mirror seemed to pull at her from its place down the hall. She wasn't aware of walking, yet there she stood, in front of the mirror again. When she looked at her reflection, she heard a quiet murmuring voice in her head, trying hard to remember

something. It felt like a word she needed to say, right at the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't quite grasp it. She got bits and pieces that seemed right, but the memory would not solidify.

Then, in a flash, it all returned to her and she remembered. As the pieces in her mind snapped into place, her reflection in the mirror changed again to silver and white with the laurel of gold on her head. "That's right, my name is..."

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Ren sat bolt upright in her bed; her hair soaked with sweat and thought, *My name is — Daaah! My name is what? It was just there. I remembered it. I was just about to say it. Dang it!*

Every night since the day she first gazed into that mirror in Brad's house, Ren had the same dream. Every night she would remember the name, burst awake, and completely forget it again.

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A few hours later and one block north, Bo entered the locker-room after gym. As he turned the corner, he felt a very large knee impact below his ribs. His breath exploded out of him and he fell to his knees, unable to breathe.

"I told you it wasn't over, son." Lucky placed one foot on Bo's shoulder and kicked him onto his back. He took his time sitting down on Bo's chest, so he couldn't escape. Reveling in sweet victory, he rained down punches onto Bo's face.

Unfortunately for Bo, Bubba was out sick. He was one of the few kids at the school brave enough to stand up to

Lucky. His absence made it easy for Lucky to execute his plan for revenge. The other boys gathered around, but no one made a move to help.

It felt like he had been getting hit in the face for hours when Coach finally came to his rescue.

Coach snapped Lucky into a headlock. "You two, help Bo get cleaned up and take him down to the nurse. The rest of you get changed. The bell is going to ring soon and you don't want to be late for your next class."

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In the nurse's office, Bo sat on a padded bench with a wad of tissue shoved up each nostril and an ice pack on each swollen, discolored eye. He tasted the blood dripping down the back of his throat.

"Would you like me to call your father to come pick you up?" asked Nurse Hammel.

He shook his head.

"Would you like to rest here for a while?"

He nodded and laid back on the bench.

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"A while" turned out to be the rest of the day. He didn't want his father to have to pick him up in his condition and he certainly didn't want to go to class with two black eyes and tissue shoved up his nose. Once the dismissal bell rang, Bo made his way outside to meet his sister.

"Sweet Moses, Bo! What the heck happened to your face?"

He just shook his head and waved her off.

"Don't try to play this down. When I find out who did this, I'm going to kick his butt so hard he'll have two cracks.

Dang it! Today's the day Brad comes back. Do you still want to go see him now? You feeling up to it?"

Bo nodded and led the way.

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As they walked, Ren told Bo about the dreams she'd been having for the last two weeks. "Hopefully, when we get back to his house, I'll be able to look at that mirror again. It's been driving me crazy."

A note hung on the front door of Brad's house:

*Ren and Bo, please enter and come back to the kitchen.*

"Sweet! We'll pass right by that mirror."

As they entered the house they heard voices from down the hall.

"Hello! Come on in!" Lan's voice boomed, though it sounded like he had food in his mouth.

They could see the kitchen at the end of the hall to the left. As they passed the mirror, Ren looked at her reflection and got that feeling again, like she needed to remember something, but it didn't come to her. She didn't want to be too obvious about it, though, so she just kept walking.

Once in the kitchen, she and Bo sat down and helped themselves to the chips and salsa laid out in the center.

Joey gestured toward his own eyes, then to Bo's questioningly.

Bo just shook his head and continued to eat the chips.

Ren adjusted her chair at the table, almost overwhelmed by the smell of too much aftershave, but to be

polite, she refrained from commenting. She also noticed Brad had a few of those sores again and some bandages to go with them. Not as many as last time though.

Brad had some files sitting on the table in front of him as he began, "Vern Wilfred was your great-grandfather's friend who was killed on August 12, 1946. He was very briefly a suspect in the case of a missing woman, though your grandpa probably never knew. Going back was tough because some of the documents had been destroyed. In fact, it looks like there was a lot of improper handling of documents and evidence in that case." He spun the file around and pushed it toward Ren.

She placed one hand over her mouth and flipped through the file with the other.

"Vern had an uncle in the sheriff's office," he continued. "It looks like the uncle swept everything tying Vern to the victim under the rug."

Ren had expected to hear something like that. She felt disturbed yet somehow comforted at the same time.

He gave her a minute to read the file and mull it over before continuing. "Ren, do you believe in the Almighty?"

She paused a moment and blinked in confusion. "Uh, what? I'm sorry, did we just change subject? I think I may have spaced out for a second there."

"No, the subject is the same. Do you believe?" As he spoke, Brad casually gathered the files together into one neat stack.

"We've been known to go to church, tithe, give service — that sort of stuff." Ren furrowed her brow, still unsure they were still on the same subject as before.

Brad kept his tone level and placed his hands gently atop each other on the table. "Would you characterize the nature of the Almighty as *supernatural*?"

"Yeah, I suppose so." She looked at her brother, who

returned her confused look and shrugged.

“Then it would be fair to say you believe in the supernatural,” insisted Brad.

“Sure, I guess you could say that. Not that I believe in leprechauns and unicorns, but I believe in God, angels, the devil, that sort of stuff. Is this going somewhere?”

He leaned to the side to look past Ren, down the hall, then back to her. “I see you’ve taken an interest in the mirror in the hallway.”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“The last time you were here, Joey told me you may have seen something unusual in the mirror. What did you see?”

Ren looked quickly over her shoulder at the mirror, then down to the files on the table, then back to Brad and asked, “Are you sure we didn’t change the subject? I thought we were talking about the killings. I’m seriously confused here.”

“We’re still on the same subject, I assure you. What did you see in the mirror?”

Ren paused for a moment, trying, unsuccessfully, to connect the mirror to the killings. “It’s probably nothing, but for a second when I looked at my own reflection, my clothes were different. They were white and silver and there was some sort of a golden laurel thing on my head. I think it’s been bugging my subconscious because I’ve been having dreams about it ever since. In the dream, I’m remembering something. Remembering a name, I think. I think it’s supposed to be my name for some reason.”

“Fantastic,” said Brad, and a satisfied smile worked its way onto his face. “That mirror is a supernatural artifact.”

Ren tilted her head quizzically as she turned again to look over her shoulder, down the hall.

“You said before you believe in the supernatural and

I'm telling you that mirror is a supernatural artifact," Brad explained.

"Brad, you're freaking me out," said Ren as she folded her hands in her lap nervously.

"Please, go back down the hall and look again at your reflection," said Brad as he shooed her toward the hall with his index finger.

She got up from the table and walked to the mirror.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"I see myself just as I am now, but I've got that feeling in my head like I'm supposed to remember something. I can feel the memory pressing me, but it won't pop into my mind." She narrowed her eyes as she studied her image.

"That mirror has a special property to it," Brad explained. "It wears thin the veil between the spiritual and the physical worlds. The longer something is around it, the thinner the veil becomes." As he continued to speak, he and Lan got up from the table and walked to the mirror to stand behind Ren, who focused intently on her own reflection. Despite Lan's great size, his footsteps were surprisingly light in comparison to Brad's. "Out in the everyday world, the veil is very thick and men must rely on faith to remain connected to the spiritual. Here, the spiritual is reflected back at you and you can know exactly what you are."

With a puzzled look on her face, a new question occurred to her. *What do you mean "what you are?"*

Ren looked from her reflection to the reflections of Brad and Lan, standing behind her. Their reflections were wrong. Lan's head looked like the head of a wolf and Brad appeared to be a rotten corpse. Instantly, all the pieces of the mystery fell together in her mind. *The heart and the brain; werewolf and zombie. It's not one kind of monster. It's two!*

"BO! RUN!"

TRAVIS GALVAN

## Chapter 10

### AN UNEXPECTED CHANGE

Like a viper striking at prey, Lan's oversized hand took control of Ren's head. With his palm against the back of her head, his thumb reached past her ear on one side, his little finger past the ear on the other, and each of his remaining three fingers decorated her forehead.

Bo exploded from his chair when Ren shouted to flee but Joey moved faster than should have been possible and slammed him down into his seat, pinning his arms to his sides.

Lan led Ren into the kitchen where Joey held Bo.

Joey turned Bo's chair so he faced away from the table.

Following Ren and Lan into the kitchen, Brad spoke in calm even tones, "The situation you're in now is a little beyond the realm of believability. That's why I needed you to come to certain realizations on your own. For example, the realization you're dealing with the supernatural. Not just the thought you *might* be dealing with it, but the factual knowledge of it. Sudden and unexpected realization is

traumatic and causes many to experience a psychotic break. That's why I gave you all summer to work on the animal attacks, so you would have a chance to warm up to the idea that the supernatural was possible and, in this case, probable.

"I planted that chatty park ranger at the first attack site to get you started on the right path. You, being what you are, I knew you wouldn't be able to resist the mystery, especially so close to home. I knew you would rush to the scene of the crime as soon as you could. Then, to further assist in your readiness, I placed the mirror in the hall. Ever since you saw your spiritual reflection in the mirror, it's been working on your subconscious, preparing you to hear the whole truth."

Ren trembled, paralyzed with fear. She tried to think, but her mind reeled from the blow to her sense of reality.

Brad continued. "Now that you've seen the truth with your own eyes, I want you to know we have no intention of harming you. I need your help and I need you to trust me. I can understand that, for now, the trust part is going to be difficult. I can't force you to trust me." He moved behind Bo's chair and took Joey's place holding him down. "I can, however, force you to need me, which is the next best thing. Joey, go ahead."

Joey removed his shirt and knelt on the floor.

In Ren's mind, the next two seconds seemed to take days.

Joey's skull elongated, his ears moved toward the top of his head, gray fur sprouted all over, and his hands and feet drew up into little paws. Stepping out of his pants, it became obvious the proportions of his body were not those of a normal wolf. His head was the right size for a large, fully grown wolf, but starting around his shoulders everything seemed to get smaller from there, down to tiny paws.

Lan looked down at Bo in the chair and asked, "Do

you remember what the reports said and what the park ranger told you? They didn't say there were no tracks at all. They only said there weren't any tracks big enough to belong to a large predator. Come on, Joey, don't leave us in suspense."

All eyes were on Joey as he approached the chair. No one noticed Bo had fished out his great-grandpa's lucky quarter from his pocket. When Joey reached kicking distance, Bo thumped the quarter directly into Joey's eye.

In a bizarre and disturbing fit, Joey collapsed to the ground in convulsions. His fur rippled in patches, forming hairless blotches. The proportions of his body shrunk and grew along with the spasms.

Bo kicked Joey in the head several times as he shook on the floor and, to everyone's utter shock, he shouted, "Puh-Puh-Puh-Puh-Punk!"

The convulsions ended abruptly and Joey popped back to his feet in his unusual wolf form. With one ear up and his head tilted to the left, he looked up at Bo.

Lan turned to Ren and said, "I thought you said he was mute."

Ren struggled but failed to break free, then grumbled, "He's not mute. He just doesn't like to talk because he's got a bad stammer. Now, leave him alone!"

"I'm sorry, but we can't afford to do that. Go on, Joey. Finish your change." Brad nodded impatiently toward Joey.

Joey stood on all fours looking at Bo. Thick gray fur became short and brown. His head and upper body shrunk to fit the proportions of his comically undersized paws. His tail thinned to a small whip. With his transformation complete, he appeared as a dachshund.

Ren's mouth gaped for a moment before she snapped it shut and said, "Oh, my gosh. You don't have a sister, do you?"

“No, I don’t have a sister. Not for hundreds of years. Joey, do it,” commanded Brad as he took a more secure hold of Bo.

Joey jumped onto Bo’s lap and licked his face in a frenzy.

Bo struggled but failed to break free of Brad’s iron grip. Within a few seconds, he was coated in slobber from chin to eyebrows.

Then, like a puppy bored with a toy, Joey jumped down from Bo’s lap. He skipped to his pants, took them in his teeth, and pranced out of the room.

Brad pulled up a chair next to Bo and sat. “Lan, bring her over here so we can all sit together and have a civilized conversation.”

Lan pulled up an additional chair for Ren, shoved her into it, and released her head.

“What just happened?” demanded Ren, who continued, “I thought you guys were going to kill Bo!”

“Come on now, I told you I need you to need me. Killing Bo isn’t going to help with that. Joey just infected Bo with his lycanthropy. There is no cure. In one week, he will transform for the first time. When he does, he will become a killing machine with only one goal: find and consume human hearts. When he changes, he won’t know you. He won’t love you and the only reason he will care that you exist is because you contain what he wants: a human heart to eat.

“This is why you now need me,” explained Brad. “I have the means to control him and focus his curse to protect you and your father and all the other innocent people in our community. We’ll be waiting for him beneath the full moon in my backyard. If you don’t send him over before midnight, he will most likely kill you or your father, or both.”

“I don’t need you,” insisted Ren. “I can go to the poli...”

“Police?” interrupted Brad. “And tell them what? That your zombie neighbor and his werewolf roommates turned your little brother into a monster?”

“I don’t have to say that,” she countered. “I can just say you hurt us and they’ll come to arrest you.”

“Arrest me?” chuckled Brad. “I can assure you, the police have no ability to arrest any of us. Even if I allowed them to catch me, I could simply lay down and play dead. They don’t post armed guards on a corpse. I’ll just wait until no one is looking and walk off. My guys can just turn into dachshunds. The police don’t arrest dogs. And let’s say hypothetically they did somehow manage to arrest me and the guys, who’s going to stop your brother from going on a murderous rampage every month for the rest of his life? Your brother will have to be locked away as well, forever. Like I said, you need me. No one else can protect you from Bo or teach him to control his transformation and his instincts.”

Ren clenched her teeth. She knew he was right on all accounts. She knew she had no way out — yet. “So why do you need me so badly?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you. If I did, you wouldn’t believe me anyway. I will say that it has to do with your true name, that name you’ve been trying to remember in your dreams. Don’t worry about it for now. It may take a while before you’re ready to remember it. Until then, I just need you to understand that what I’m doing is not evil.”

“Not evil? You’re a serial killer!” snapped Ren.

“Is a hurricane evil? Is a tornado? An earthquake? I’m not as abstract or as random as a tsunami or an avalanche, but the fundamental principles by which I operate are the same. I don’t pick these individuals because I hate them or because I have anything to gain from their deaths. I don’t do this because I enjoy it. Forces far beyond my control dictate

that someone must die. I just make sure that someone is a person who actually deserves it. Is that evil?" He asked.

Ren shifted her gaze and kept her thoughts to herself.

"Perhaps a history lesson can give you some *perspective*," he continued. "I was born Juan Felipe Marcos De Salamanca on July 5, 1515. I sailed the Atlantic with the Spanish conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in the year 1535. I'm sure you've read about the conquistadors in history class. I'm sure you know what we did to the indigenous peoples.

"One day in 1539, I was with a small group of my men in what would now be Mexico. We were ambushed and slaughtered. All but me. I was held overnight in the valley where my men died. The next morning, three men came down from the mountain.

"They each laid one hand on my head and reached the other to the sky and chanted for what seemed to be hours. I passed out at some point. When I came to, they had freed me from my bonds. Before they left, they said to me, 'You have been a destroyer in these lands and for the rest of the age of man, you will continue to be a destroyer. You are now the blessed avenging zombie. This curse will be yours until the end of days'."

Ren shook her head, trying to comprehend what she had just been told. "Hold on. How is it both a blessing and a curse?"

"I have been blessed with unstoppable power," he explained. "At the same time, I am also cursed. I can smell the evil of men. Its aroma causes my stomach to ache with dark cravings. The vilest of men bring on cravings I can only resist for a short time. The brains of the evil men I hunt are the only thing that will satisfy me. When I eat, my body regenerates to a state that's almost living again. Then, in the following days and weeks, I start to rot and putrefy, but I can

no more die than I can resist the mandate of my curse. I've tried everything to kill myself, but nothing works. I've even thrown myself into the mouth of an active volcano. Somehow, I still come back. This blessing of unstoppable power is a curse of its own."

"If you're so indestructible, why do you live with were-wiener-dogs?" asked Ren.

"They are werewolves," Brad assured her. "Don't be mistaken. However, much the same way as dachshunds were created by selectively breeding wolves down to domestic dogs, my friends here are descendants of selective breeding that gives them an additional transformation state."

Ren furrowed her brow and said, "That's ridiculous. Who would go through all the trouble to turn a werewolf into a wiener dog?"

"I would," said Brad as he gestured toward his roommates. "Transforming into a dachshund is like urban camo. They blend right in wherever they go in a city. Even if they walk through a crowd of people, no one suspects anything. So, when they are out hunting, they don't really have to worry about anyone seeing them, which brings me to the *why* of your question.

"We have a mutually beneficial coexistence. I help them control their curse, allowing them the ability to only hunt evil men, and in return, they bring the brains to me, to satisfy my curse. Even though they're werewolves who kill at every full moon, they're actually a couple of genuinely nice fellas. They would be grief-stricken if they ever thought they'd harmed an innocent person."

Ren scowled around the room and grumbled, "Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"Come on now," scoffed Brad. "You only say that because you don't really know them. Give them a couple of months. They grow on you. But, like I was saying, if I hunted

by myself, I would leave evidence that might lead police back to me — not that I'm worried that the police could hurt me, but I have to live too and I'm not particularly interested in legal drama. Doing things our way allows us to remain anonymous. No legal drama and everyone wins. Well, everyone except for the ones we kill."

Ren placed a palm against her forehead and said, "My brain is ready to explode." She looked at her brother, who had turned a rather sickly shade of green, then back to Brad. "You said Bo was already turned into a werewolf. Doesn't he have to get bitten? Isn't that what all the legends say?"

"That is what the legends say and for the most part, it's true. However, as I indicated previously, my friends aren't your run-of-the-mill werewolf breed. As with dogs, each breed has different breed features. Beagles, for example, produce very little saliva, so they're a great dog for someone who can't stand the slobber. Lycanthropy is passed through the saliva, but in my friends, the component of the saliva that acts as a catalyst to bring on the change is only produced in dachshund form and is transferred by licking the orifices of the face. Betrayed with a kiss some might say," Brad teased. "The traditional way was so uncivilized, so I had it bred out of them."

Ren's eyes lit with rage as she fumed, "Uncivilized! You're worried about uncivilized! Do you honestly think what you've done to my brother is civilized?"

"Please calm yourself," insisted Brad. "There's no need to shout. No one is dead who wasn't already dead and no one is going to die whom we weren't already planning to kill. As for Bo, he got a wet face."

"A wet face and a friggin' *curse!*" seethed Ren.

"Yes. There is that, but like I said, as long as I'm around, I can help him control that, to some extent."

“And exactly how do you plan to do that?” demanded Ren.

“I have another supernatural artifact. It’s a talisman I implanted in my chest for safekeeping. It allows me to command them, as long as it’s not something they wouldn’t normally object to. All lycanthropes know the language of the talisman; Vulgar Tongue. Well, them and me, since I have it. When the moon brings out their transformation, I give them specific instructions on who to hunt and no one else. This safeguards the public and guarantees only the necessary person comes to any harm.”

“Hold on again!” interrupted Ren. “Joey just transformed and it’s not a full moon. It’s the middle of the day.”

“Once a lycanthrope goes through his first transformation,” Brad explained. “He can begin to learn to transform at will.”

“And what about silver?” asked Ren.

“You had an excellent demonstration earlier,” Brad replied. “It short-circuits their ability to transform. In human form, it only causes an uncomfortable feeling, but when they are transformed it causes them to fall into a sort of transformation seizure. Oh, and in either state, it suspends their ability to regenerate damaged tissue. They can normally regenerate from almost any injury in very little time unless they’re *poisoned* with silver. If they’re wounded while any silver remains in their bodies, they could die.”

“Crap, Bo!” exclaimed Ren. “You have a silver tooth.”

Joey returned to the kitchen and said, “Silver tooth, huh? Bo, let me see your eyes.”

Bo turned his blackened eyes toward Joey, then after a couple of seconds, his expression went dim.

Joey kept his eyes locked onto Bo’s and said, “Okay, take the tooth.”

Ren jumped up from her chair and attempted to shove Brad away from her brother. “Back off! You can’t just rip his tooth out.”

Brad pushed her back into her chair and assured her, “Don’t worry. He won’t feel a thing. Most lycanthropes develop a unique ability only they can perform. If you look into Joey’s eyes, he can mesmerize you. You’ll be totally oblivious to the world around you so long as he maintains eye contact. Bo won’t feel a thing.”

He thumbed open Bo’s mouth and looked around inside to find one of his molars with a silver cap. He reached in with his bare hand and popped the tooth out. He held it up so light glinted off it and tossed it to Ren. “There, you can give that to the tooth fairy.”

She looked on and to her amazement, Bo not only grew a new molar, but the discoloration and swelling from both of his black eyes faded to his normal skin tone. Stunned by what she had witnessed, she exhaled a whisper. “Criminy, Bo — you’re a werewolf.”

Joey patted Bo on the head and said, “Alright, tough guy, you’re all done.”

Bo blinked his eyes as though waking from an unexpected nap and looked around the room questioningly, then felt his face. What had just been painfully swollen and bruised skin less than a minute ago was now firm and painless.

Ren held out his silver tooth for him to see. Looking at the tooth herself, she took a moment to think about everything that had gone down in such a short time. The supernatural was real and for some reason, she was squarely set in the middle of it. The pressure on her conscious and unconscious mind caused her to feel numb as the compass of her sense of reality reset. *If zombies and werewolves are fact, is there any such thing as fiction?*

Brad stood quickly and moved to the entrance of the kitchen, then gestured to the kids. "Alrighty, you two are welcome to go on home. I trust I won't have to remind either of you that you need us to remain safe. If it's any consolation, we need you too and someday you'll find out why.

"Also, it would be unwise to talk about what went on here today with your father. He loves you very much and he's likely to do something rash if he finds out. He's a good man and I don't want anything bad to happen to him. Don't misunderstand, that's not a threat. It's a plea. Please don't tell him. The world needs more men like him. Bo, keep your sister safe for us. She's very important." Brad paused, then continued again in the language of the talisman. He seemed to give Bo instructions, then returned to English. "Do you understand?"

Bo nodded.

Ren glared at Brad with suspicious eyes. "What did you tell him?" she demanded.

Bo took her hand and said, "He told me to take care of you and that I should express myself more often. It will help me maintain control."

Ren's eyes grew wide as she gripped her brother's hand. "Bo! Your voice!"

"Go on home now and think about everything we've talked about today. Ren, make sure you send Bo to me Wednesday *before* midnight."

She turned and started for the door, pulling her brother along with her. "We'll see about that."

"Please, I urge you. Send him. Oh, and I'll throw you a bone on trying to figure out the name. When your father comes home tonight, ask him what happened on the day you were born."

TRAVIS GALVAN

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