

FROM THE AUTHOR OF SMALL HEARTS  
BRYAN WAYNE DULL

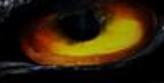
*Welcome*

TO

NOWHERE, OHIO

PART OF THE WOLF CREEK TOWNSHIP

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...well, some of it is anyway.**

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This book is  
dedicated to the only place I ever called  
home, during an era gone but not forgotten.

THE  
HARVEST  
MOON

# THE COLD OPEN

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# VOICES CARRY

*Keep it down now.*

Anna Blake's right hand trembled as she struggled to apply blue eye shadow, a daring choice for her. Makeup had never been her forte; she preferred a more minimalistic approach with just concealer, lipstick, and a touch of mascara. But today was different. Her stomach twisted into knots, threatening to rob her of her lunch.

However, the act of putting on a substantial amount of makeup wasn't what caused her nerves to tangle. No, it was something much more exhilarating. The reason behind her anxious excitement was none other than Jessie Cohen, a boy so ridiculously adorable she couldn't help but blush at the thought of him. This was her first official date as a high schooler, a milestone arriving fashionably late for her compared to the other girls who had started dating in junior high. Anna vividly remembered how her sophomore year marked a turning point. Her complexion had finally cleared, prompting her father to give his blessing for her to wear makeup. From that week onward, guys from all grades at Wadsworth High couldn't help but notice her. It was as if a spotlight had been cast upon her, and now, it shone even brighter with the prospect of her date with Jessie.

Boys.

Throughout her teenage years, Anna's familiarity with guys was limited to the two Coreys—Feldman and Haim. The poster of the vampire flick, *The Lost Boys* adorned her bedroom wall, strategically placed near the window allowing the moonlight to illuminate its art. She yearned for her own *License to Drive*, but despite her efforts scouring local stores like Musicland and Spencer's Gifts, she hadn't found it yet.

Reflecting on her high school journey, Anna couldn't quite grasp why it had taken her so long to come into her own. Part of her suspected it was to please her dad. Whenever she mentioned boys around her friends, she could see the uneasiness in her father's eyes, and so she decided it was better to avoid the topic altogether. However, as Anna contemplated her imminent graduation, she realized the dawn of the '90s marked a turning point for her. She was determined to make the most of her youth, recognizing that having friends and embracing the social scene mattered the most to a teenager. No one could convince Anna otherwise.



With Halloween just a couple of days away, it seemed like everyone had plans for that Saturday night, including Anna's friends and parents. Conveniently, her parents were getting ready for a costume party hosted by her father's workplace. They were running late, which meant Jessie, Anna's date, wouldn't have to endure the potentially awkward encounter with her parents. As the chilly wind whistled through the screen of Anna's bedroom window, she found comfort in its familiar sound. Unlike many who developed a predisposition to fear it from watching horror movies, she welcomed the atmospheric noise.

Outside, she could hear the excited chatter and laughter of kids as they roamed the streets. The younger ones headed to their local church for a round of trick-or-treating, while the junior high schoolers either walked or drove to various parties scattered throughout the neighborhood. Standing before the long-framed mirror attached to the back of her cheaply manufactured bedroom door, Anna wondered if she had chosen the right shade of makeup. She gazed at her reflection, hoping the blue eye shadow matched her vision. The doors in their house, like many others in Akron, had a hollow sound when closed. It reminded Anna of the time when her father got angry about her mother's credit card spending and ended up punching a hole through one of the doors—*apparently, keeping people out is no longer a priority*, she thought.

In her pink dress, reminiscent of Molly Ringwald's moment scene in *Sixteen Candles*, Anna felt like a modern day princess. The tulle skirt, puff sleeves, sweetheart neckline, and princess-y pink hue made her look and feel irresistible. With her vibrant red hair, she had the perfect look to pull off the costume, although she had to secure a few clips to tame its length.

An unexpected yell echoed from the street behind her house, only to abruptly fall silent. Intrigued, Anna turned toward her window, wondering if someone from her neighborhood was causing a ruckus. Stepping closer, her view obstructed, she strained to see outside. To her surprise, there was nothing amiss in her backyard. No one walked along the sidewalk or street behind her house, and the flickering light poles cast erratic shadows. At the corner of the chain link fence surrounding her home, something wobbled back and forth, catching her attention. As Anna observed closely, the object appeared torn and shredded, like a tattered bag caught in the wind. The evenings had grown darker earlier, making it difficult to see clearly outside. The wind blew fiercely, causing colored leaves to dance across the grass



and road beneath the radiant light of the full moon—the first of the month. The serene scene brought a sense of calm to Anna.

"Alright! We're about to leave," Anna's father, Phillip, bellowed as he swung open the door to her bedroom, causing her to startle. Anna let out a shrill shriek, springing to her feet in surprise. Her hand instinctively pressed against her chest, as people often do when caught off guard, trying to steady her racing heartbeat and catch her breath.

*He is always doing this! This is pissing me off!*

"Dad!" Anna with irritation, growled. Worried about the time, Phillip briefly tore his gaze from his watch to meet his daughter's eyes. "Do you mind?"

Phillip winced, realizing his mistake, and then shrugged his shoulders, still not fully comprehending why Anna was so upset. "The door, dad! Knock on it!" Anna's frustration was palpable as she scolded him. Phillip tilted his head back, opened his mouth, and waved his finger, finally understanding the reason for her annoyance. "I'm bad about that, aren't I?"

Anna nodded, her wide-eyed glare speaking volumes as she continued to catch her breath. "Yes, all the time, dad."

"I'm sorry. I forget sometimes, is all," Phillip explained, struggling to come to terms with his daughter's accelerated transition into womanhood. "It's just it all happens so quickly, and suddenly you're all grown up, looking lovely in your dress."

Anna pressed her lips together, uncertain about how to respond to her father without sounding disrespectful. "Yes, Daddy. That's how time works," she smiled, her words falling somewhat short.

Phillip sighed, his head shaking gently, understanding Anna's reaction while choosing to disregard the undertone of sarcasm. Lately, Anna had been displaying a more assertive demeanor, a response he deemed reasonable given the circumstances. "Are you prepared for your date, then?" he inquired, a touch of anxiety threading his words.

With her arms gracefully raised, Anna spun around, allowing her father to catch a glimpse of her new "costume"—a convenient excuse for acquiring a new dress. "You look like that girl in those movies you like. Um, Ally, something or another," he commented playfully.

"Molly Ringwald," Anna replied, her eyes rolling in slight frustration at his recurring inability to recall actors' names.

"The dark-haired one?" he ventured.

"No. She's the other one with the red hair, like me."

"I see," he nodded, though he might not entirely grasp the comparison. "I intended to come up here and provide you with the contact number for where we'll be," Phillip said, handing his daughter a neatly folded piece of paper to slip into her purse. "So, if you find yourself needing something, feeling uncomfortable, or requiring a ride home. You understand?" It's a thoughtful gesture, truly alluding to safety concerns without explicitly mentioning those particular words to his sole child, his beloved daughter.

"I understand, Daddy," she grinned, her cheeks tinted with a mixture of embarrassment and acknowledgment of his concern. Phillip nodded with his reluctance evident as he broached a sensitive topic. "Just... just don't engage in anything that might lead to regrets, alright? Anything that could make you, or us, feel ashamed?"

Taken aback by her father's implication, Anna's eyes widened. "No, Daddy," she responded firmly, her voice reflecting her shock at the suggestion.

Phillip nodded once more, reassuring himself his daughter would remain the person he and his wife had raised her to be. Anna averted her gaze from her father, her fingers beginning to fiddle with objects on her desk. A sense of insult simmered within her, evident in her actions.

"When are you leaving?" Phillip inquired.

Anna cast another glance out the window, hopeful to spot Jessie strolling down the street. "Shouldn't take too long. His place is just a short distance down the road, and the party isn't that far either. We figured we'd walk there."

Feeling relieved, Phillip responded, "Ah, I see. So you probably won't need a ride, then."

"Guess not," Anna replied, her tone tinged with a hint of disappointment.

Recognizing the shift in his daughter's mood, Phillip understood it was time to bring their somewhat awkward conversation to a close. "So, before you head out tonight, make sure to lock the door. It's a bit finicky, so you might need to lift it a bit to get it to close properly. It'll feel like it's locked, but it might not be."

Given the neighborhood's relative safety, there was a sense of ease about leaving the house. Anna had a habit of misplacing her key, so she only had the one for the doorknob lock, while Phillip held the key to the

deadbolt. "Got it. Ensure the door is securely closed," she quipped, giving her father a mockingly stern look.

Phillip rolled his eyes and exited the room, adding, "Remember, curfew is midnight. Don't make me regret extending it."

Anna let out a sigh as she requested her father to close the door behind him. Phillip's hand gripped the knob, the door slowly swinging shut, and he watched as his daughter's more mature visage gradually disappeared within the narrowing gap. Gently, he let his hand rest upon her bedroom door, a sense of nostalgia washing over him. Phillip sighed, reminiscing about a younger Anna and the simplicity of those days. Shaking off the sentiment, he descended the staircase, ready to face his wife Maria, who appeared rather annoyed. Her agitation only heightened as Phillip shot a sarcastic grin in her direction. He could be quite childlike at times, especially in his interactions with his wife, although, to be fair, he seemed to be consistently unchanging. The same couldn't be said for Maria, however.

Bounding down the stairs, Phillip caught a glimpse of his wife's displeased expression. "You're aware we were supposed to arrive ten minutes ago, Phillip!" she scolded him.

A reassuring smile formed on his lips as he replied from the right side, "It's alright. The place isn't far, and honestly, what's the harm in being fashionably late?"

Maria chuckled at the notion. "That would be fine if you were still fashionable. How long have you had this suit?" Her attention turned to fixing her husband's tie, prompting him to consider her question about his choice of attire. "I don't think it's been that long. Maybe late seventies if I had to guess," he responded, stretching the truth a bit.

"Phillip Blake, you lie like a rug!" Maria exclaimed, a hearty laugh escaping her lips as she found amusement in her husband's playful exaggeration. "You've had that suit since Anna was a toddler."

He couldn't contest her statement; he had long learned not to argue with her about such matters. If not for Maria, he might be lost in the chaos of their household. Yet, a sudden concern gripped Phillip, interrupting his laughter. He needed to ask Maria a crucial question, an embarrassment to even consider. "Have you talked to her? You know, about the way things are with adults and boys and all that?" he inquired tentatively.

Maria's smile was understanding, well aware he would never have been the one to give their daughter the "birds and the bees" talk. "Years ago,

dear," she assured him.

Relief washed over Phillip, and he smiled, his gaze shifting to his wife's hands deftly fixing his light blue tie with red stripes. As he contemplated her response, a sudden realization dawned on him. "Years? Really?" he echoed with evident surprise.

They both exited the house and proceeded toward the detached garage. Phillip, however, didn't follow his own advice regarding the front door, leaving it slightly ajar, vulnerable to a strong gust of wind that could easily push it open. Meanwhile, Anna Blake's parents embarked on their way to a party in her father's blue '87 Chevy Cavalier. Simultaneously, Anna herself patiently awaited her date's arrival, anticipating the sound of the doorbell.

Outside Anna's bedroom door, Miss Boot-Boots Bittenbacher, the family cat, pawed at the wood. Anna was in the midst of waiting for her hair curler to heat up, aiming to add an extra bounce to her red curls. The sound of her kitty's whining reached her ears, annoyance evident on her face as she contemplated opening the door to let Boots inside. Her pink and purple Caboodle hair accessory case, home to a crimper and scrunchies, teetered precariously on her vanity table as she rose from her bed.

"Come on, you little gremlin," Anna sighed playfully, feigning irritation as she looked down at her feline companion with its endearing big eyes. A sense of friskiness emanated from the cat; a quality Anna couldn't help but notice. "Who's a little chubby furball?" she continued to play as her kitty's back legs clung to her human's arm.

A sudden draft from the window sent a chill through Anna's room, causing her to shiver. Then, with a loud bang, the door slammed shut from the force of the wind, which had blown in through the ajar front door. This unexpected noise startled both Anna and Boots. While she knew the house could get a bit chilly, *this is weird*.

Her date, and potential boyfriend, Jessie Cohen, was now over thirty minutes late in arriving at her home. Anna couldn't help but feel a pang of anxiety. Had she been stood up? The thought of it was devastating to her ego. This was her first real date, and it meant the world to her.

She quickly opened the door again and closed the window, her gaze fixed outside as she wondered what was happening. Boots, seemingly sharing her restlessness, leaped onto Anna's bed and began to play frantically with a pen left behind after she finished her homework. The cat

was clearly full of energy, arching her back at the inanimate object of her playfulness.

Anna couldn't help but be curious about the object wedged in the corner of the fence encircling her home's perimeter. *Was it a bag? Perhaps a piece of cardboard? What in the world could be stuck there?* The fence was a simple, inexpensive chain link variety, which meant just about anything could have gotten caught on the jagged top where the wires interlaced. These kinds of fences were quite common in the neighborhood, and as Anna thought about it, she couldn't recall any house in the community or on her block having a nice wooden fence.

Her anticipation continued to build. "He'll be coming up the street any moment now," she whispered to herself, her nerves making her hands fidget against her dress. The excitement was palpable, and she couldn't wait for his arrival.

Boots began to trill at Anna, clearly wanting to be picked up and loved. Anna couldn't resist. When Miss Boot-Boots made the noise, it was an irresistible cuteness overload for Anna, making it nearly impossible not to give her kitty some attention.

Irritated by the thought of her date's tardiness, she put the cat in her arms, cradling her like an infant, and declared, "Men. What's the point of even worrying about it? They're probably all jerks anyway."

With her distinctive black feet, Boots lightly dug her claws into Anna's dress and started climbing toward her shoulder, where she often liked to drape her paws over and rest her head. But this time, something was different. This time, something had caught her attention, something she wanted nothing to do with—a home invasion.

Boots's claws pierced Anna's chest, drawing blood as Anna flailed in pain, desperately trying to free herself from her master's grip. "What the hell is wrong with you!" Anna yelled in shock and pain, quickly pulling Boots from her skin as the cat hissed and growled. With a swift and trembling motion, Anna tossed Boots onto her unmade bed, watching as the feline squeezed through the beams of her headboard, seeking refuge from whatever had frightened her. Anna observed her cat's eyes glowing from the deep corner where the bed met the wall. Then, Boots tumbled onto the floor, scuttling back and forth in a frantic attempt to escape the bedroom.

A deep, unsettling growl emanated from a gurgling mouth full of saliva just outside Anna's room. Slowly, her gaze shifted from Boots toward the

door. A wild animal somehow entered her home—an uninvited beast with pitch black, patchy fur, a furrowed brow, and fierce pale eyes.

Her knees felt like rubber, and it was a struggle to stiffen them enough to move her body. Neither Anna nor the beast broke eye contact. They locked onto each other as Anna, moving cautiously, made her way towards her vanity, her mind racing to find some means of defense. The only reachable weapon she could grasp was the hair curler she had intended to use earlier. It was plugged in and hot, and she intended to wield it to the best of her ability as she slowly retreated from the advancing creature.

Anna wasn't sure if her slow, deliberate movements would provide any advantage over the wolf, but for the moment, they seemed to work. As she moaned softly, she fought back the urge to cry and began to sing the "Conjunction Junction" song she had learned back in middle school. It was an unusual choice, but it helped her concentrate, keeping her wits about her during this terrifying situation. In times of crisis, the most unexpected things come to mind to stay calm.

The beast bared its fangs as Anna cautiously inched closer to her heated curler. Beside her vanity, she reached out for it, but with each moment her hand drew nearer to the handle, the wolf advanced as well. Anna couldn't help but look down at its front paws, and the realization struck her—they weren't like an animal's paw. They were different, more extended, resembling fingers. Its hind legs seemed typical for a canine, but its hips were unnatural, displaying a strange mutation almost resembling a human. Its torso resembled that of an emaciated human, but there was something even more disturbing to Anna.

It took another step. As its foot met the floor, Anna saw it clearly. It had toes—like a person, but larger, longer, with more hair and long, sharp nails. The sight sent a shiver down her spine, as the reality of the situation became increasingly bizarre and unsettling.

Anna's fingers trembled as she continued to reach for her only choice of weapon. With each subtle movement, the werewolf snarled in anticipation, displaying an unsettling awareness of her intentions. Frustration and fear surged within Anna as her own body seemed to rebel against her in this pivotal moment. She understood all she had to do was look to her left, but she couldn't muster the courage to divert her gaze from the menacing creature. In her mind, maintaining eye contact was the key to her survival,

and the mere thought of breaking it filled her with an overwhelming sense of dread.

*If I look away, I'll die tonight.*

It was time. Now or never. Anna understood exactly what she had to do and where she needed to go.

*Get out of this room. Down the stairs and through the sliding glass door to escape through the backyard. From there, I'll go and get help. The Haggarty's will help. They're always home.* It was a sound plan. The front door was the obvious choice. If Anna could inflict enough harm on the creature to make it retreat through the front, it would be more challenging for it to pursue her. Those thick glass doors seemed like an impenetrable barrier, providing a measure of safety she desperately needed.

*Now!*

Anna reached for the hot curling iron with her left hand, all the while maintaining her peripheral vision on the menacing wolf. Her fingers found the power cord, and she pulled the hot iron closer to her. As she moved to grab it, the wolf growled menacingly, its long, yellow canines gleaming ominously in the dim light of the room.

But Anna didn't hesitate. When her hand firmly grasped the weapon, the creature leaped towards her with deadly intent. Reacting swiftly, Anna swung her arm back and then forward with all her strength. The hot curling iron collided with the left side of the wolf's face, searing its skin where its upper mouth and nose met. The agonizing pain caused the creature to yelp in distress.

The impact of the animal's body against Anna's vanity table was devastating, akin to a wrecking ball colliding with a dilapidated house. Despite the chaos, Anna clung tightly to her weapon. In one fluid, graceful motion, she twirled her body clear of the fallen wolf. The creature, with its claws shredding the hardwood floor, struggled to regain its footing.

Anna seized the opportunity presented to her. She fled her room and the beast inside, making a hasty escape. Slamming the door behind her, she wished desperately for a way to lock it. However, she couldn't afford to linger in the upstairs hallway to figure it out. Anna raced down the stairs, nearly missing a couple of steps in her haste, her heart pounding with fear and adrenaline.

*No. That's not how it will get me.*



As Anna reached the bottom floor, the kitchen came into view to her right. As she hurried down the short hallway, she couldn't help but notice the small closet space under the stairs, an inviting spot for hiding. It was tempting, but she knew she needed help from people, and the only way to get it was by calling out into the neighborhood where others might hear.

An internal debate raged within her. *Maybe if it can't find me, then it will go away*, Anna thought as she passed by the door under the stairs. But her instinct to seek assistance from others won out, and she continued onward, determined to alert her neighbors and find safety in their numbers.

*Wait! The knives and other weapons were in the kitchen.*

Anna rushed to the decorative wooden block on the kitchen counter where the cutlery was stored. There were various knives of different sizes, but she couldn't afford to be overly selective. In her mind, there was only one option: the chef's knife. She grabbed it from the block and held it up, examining her reflection in the polished blade, her eye filled with determination and fear.

*Good enough.*

Anna stepped up to the sliding glass door, her heart pounding in her chest, as the beast above continued to slam its body against her bedroom walls. It wouldn't take long for the wolf to tear down the cheap and frail bedroom door. The wood began to splinter with each forceful strike, the scratching sound of its claws ripping through the manufactured wood unnerving Anna and sending shivers down her spine.

With trembling hands, she pulled on the handle of the glass door, desperation in her movements. But the door refused to slide, adding to her panic.

The beast growled menacingly, shoving its snout through the hole it had created in her door. It bit and chewed pieces of the door off, widening the gap enough for it to squeeze through as it continued its relentless hunt for Anna's flesh. Anna, tears streaming down her face, continued to yank on the stubborn wooden handle, cursing at it to open. In her desperation, she glanced to the other side of the glass door and found the long piece of wood, a makeshift door jam blocking her escape. She always hated the security stick, having to bend down, taking seconds from her life, even though she understood why it was necessary.

Anna cried as she removed the wooden obstacle, fearing she might not escape in time. The sound of the beast above grew louder and more

menacing. It panted and howled, pushing its torso through the jagged hole it had created with its claws and teeth in the bedroom door. Shards of manufactured wood scraped against its body, splitting the thick skin on its arms and torso. Desperation was evident; it needed to feed, and it was determined to catch its prey.

*It's almost out.*

Anna slammed the door shut as hard as she could, knowing she couldn't lock it from the outside, at least not with any method she was aware of. She took a sharp left out of the screened porch, her heart pounding in her chest as she ran through the grass, clutching the knife in her hand. She looked behind her to see if the monster had made its way downstairs. She couldn't discern any shadows in the kitchen through the glass doors and the window above the sink, but she understood it didn't necessarily mean anything.

Barefoot and shivering from the cold, Anna gasped for air and sobbed, terrified for her life. The back corner of the fence drew nearer as she ran harder. Anna knew she had to hop over it, even if it risked tearing her dress, but it would bring her closer to safety. Her thoughts were consumed by the caught fabric on the fence, the item she couldn't make out earlier in her room. Yelling for help hadn't crossed her mind yet; her immediate focus was on getting over the fence and from the relentless creature pursuing her.

*This could be good. I can jump the fence using the cloth from scrapping me.*

Anna placed her hand between the pointed ends of the fence and swung her legs over the side, only to trip over what felt like a piece of wood or a long object, twisting her ankle in the process. She fell onto her knees, and part of her pink dress became hooked on the fence, a situation she desperately wanted to avoid. Getting back on her feet was challenging as Anna cried out in frustration, tugging on her dress, pulling it back and forth to free it from the jagged edges of the fence. She could hear the fabric tearing as it got caught.

The wind blew against Anna's back as she watched the cloth covering next to her reveal something underneath. It wasn't until she finally managed to free her dress that she noticed red stains in the middle of the white sheet with holes cut into it, where eyes should be. The wind blew against the sheet again, revealing the shape of a torso hidden beneath the soiled white fabric. Anna cautiously looked into the holes in the sheet and was met with

the gaze of lifeless, brown eyes staring back at her, dead and bloodshot with strands of entrails decorating the ground.

As she brought her gaze down from the torn sheet, she realized she had inadvertently placed her hand into the creature's abdomen for leverage. Anna's adrenaline was so high that she hadn't initially felt the cold, muddy sensation on her fingertips and palm. Short strands of congealed blood clung to chunks of torn flesh, covering her hand and wrist, having been pulled from the mutilated stomach. Confused, horrified, and frightened, Anna brought the innards to her face, mushing the meat between her fingers in a grotesque tableau of terror.

Anna trembled as she struggled to piece together the sequence of events. Her date, her very first date, Jessie Cohen, had been running late. He was supposed to arrive in his ghost costume to pick her up, but Jessie had never made it to her front door.

Her eyes drifted down, and there she saw a scattered bouquet of rose petals, the wind carrying them away alongside the broken stems once holding them. A feeling of dread gnawed at her. Was it better not to know? Could she handle the truth?

Despite the horror enveloping her, Anna reached out her bloody hand and gently pulled the ghost costume off the lifeless body to confirm her worst fear: Jessie Cohen lay dead, his insides shredded by the creature stalking her just moments earlier, mouth agape wanting to scream before his sudden death.

The gruesome scene unfolded before Anna's eyes. Jessie's right cheek had been sliced open, and he desperately clutched his hand to it in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding. But the wolf showed no mercy, tearing into his abdomen and beginning to feast on his insides. Jessie's stomach contents and the food he had eaten that day spilled onto the grass, creating a horrific scene with a still-wet pool of blood surrounding him.

Anna, overwhelmed with grief and horror, placed her trembling hand on his orange and white letterman jacket, tears streaming down her face as she stared at the grizzly bear mascot paw embroidered on it. Their high school's mascot had been a wild animal, and tragically, Jessie's life had been brutally cut short by one.

Her knees trembled, and her lower legs lost feeling from squatting beside Jessie's lifeless body. She covered her face and fell backward, unable

to bear the sight of his mutilated shape any longer. Jessie's body wasn't going anywhere, and all Anna could do was seek help.

She steadied her legs by placing her hands on the cold concrete. Before she could fully rise, she noticed something staring at her from down the sidewalk. Anna knew what it was, and she kept her eyes forward, hoping avoiding eye contact might deter it from approaching her. However, she had already learned this approach hadn't worked when she believed it would stay still if she moved slowly, avoiding its dreadful eyes. Now, it felt like wishful thinking, bordering on insanity, to believe the opposite approach would be any more successful.

Anna slowly positioned her feet under her body and rose to her feet, her gaze fixed on the house she knew she had to return to if she had any chance of surviving. The creature was outside now, but she hoped to lock it out. Her plan was clear; if she could make it to safety, Anna intended to return and secure all the doors to ensure her survival.

"Doors. How the hell did it get into my house? It was the front door. It doesn't close right," Anna mumbled answering her own question, her breath visible in the cold air as she gasped. She scraped away the sweat drenched hairs pasted to the sides of her face causing her annoyance.

*It's now or never.*

Putting on a brave yet tired face, Anna picked the knife off the ground as she rose, preparing herself to jump the fence once more and run faster than ever. She made eye contact with the wolf, staring it down from the shadows. It was dark, but its eyes were a brilliant yellow. The wolf crept slowly towards Anna, its head lowered, poised to strike. Its lips curled, revealing its menacing cusps.

Anna maintained her stare with the creature, trying to make sense of it. It resembled a wolf, but its body and head were unusually large. As it breathed, the prominent ribcage became visible, exposing the mangy condition of its torso. *This isn't right. It doesn't look well*, she thought.

The creature's front paws were stretched, resembling fingers but not quite—disjointed and bent. However, its back feet appeared normal. It was the legs appearing human, with the torso covered in matted hair, patches of fur missing, and the burn from the iron. Everything below the torso looked distinctly unnatural, as the hair receded to reveal more skin from its hips down to its feet.

*This one's a boy.*

Carefully slipping off her high-heeled pink shoes, Anna held onto the fence as her knees still felt like they would give way. She hurled her shoes toward the other side of the street, hoping it would distract the massive wolf's attention elsewhere, even if only for a moment. Now was the time for Anna to run, and she did so faster than she could recall. Anna managed to gain a few precious seconds by straightening her right arm to help propel her legs and body over the fence. Her feet landed in the bushes, causing the mongrel to take notice.

The wolf grunted and growled as it watched Anna dashing across her backyard. *Leave her alone! Damn you! You don't have to. We're not even hungry anymore,* a low, exhausted voice said to the beast.

*You have no say! This is what you do. This is what we do now. Now go!*

The wolf ran alongside Anna, separated by the fence, barking relentlessly. Anna glanced to her right and saw that the animal had jumped the chain link fence, getting dangerously close to her. It was now two legs versus four, and Anna had the advantage as she quickly reached the glass door. She could hear the sound of grass and dry leaves shuffling as the wolf approached her. Anna grasped the handle and pulled it to the left, partially opening the door. It wasn't much, but it was enough for her to slide through. *Almost there,* she told herself as she pushed her thin body halfway into the house, with her dress being the only obstacle preventing her from slipping through faster.

Fangs pierced through Anna's right calf muscle, causing her upper body to slam onto the kitchen linoleum. Her lower half remained on the other side of the porch. The animal aggressively pulled at her leg from side to side, growling like a dog with a rope toy. She knew she wouldn't escape the clenched jaws of the wolf unless she gave it a reason. Anna could feel her lower leg being torn from her body. With the sharp kitchen knife in hand, Anna turned her body over, her back to the floor, and reached toward the wolf with the blade, aimlessly waving it back and forth, desperately hoping to wound it.

*You're going to rip her apart. There is no need for this!*

The voice within the monster was filled with empathy as its vile avatar displayed nothing but rage and insatiable hunger. It was conceited, playing with its food, sure of inevitable conquest over its prey. Anna would not tire, not without a fight.

The wolf ceased jerking Anna's leg. Its fierce eyes and angered brow relaxed, unclenching its jaw as its teeth withdrew from her leg muscles. As frightening as the beast was, it looked remorseful, sorry for what it did to Anna for a brief moment. The wolf ceased causing Anna any more discomfort, but her leg pain was too great to notice its retreat. Anna swung the knife at the wolf, cutting its snout and dividing its left nostril.

The creature yelped like a wounded puppy as blood trickled down its face. Anna swiftly used her left leg to push it away with a forceful kick to its face. In a rapid spin, she smeared blood from her injured right leg onto the linoleum and managed to close the remaining part of the glass door with her fingertips.

Anna compelled herself to use her uninjured leg to rise, and with great effort, she hobbled toward the kitchen entrance. Sliding down the wall, she struggled to remain upright. In the process, the kitchen knife slipped from her grasp and clattered onto the puddle of their combined blood. Trembling from the shock of discovering her friend's lifeless body, Anna wiped away the mixture of blood, sweat, and tears from her face. Her gaze then fixed on the open front door, where bloody paw prints, left by the wolf or whatever it was, led inside and up the stairs. For a moment, there was an eerie calm—no sounds, no scents, only the wind gusting into the house.

*I have to close the door.*

She cast a final glance at the kitchen, where a yellow rotary phone hung next to the entryway leading to the living room. The living room was filled with furniture never sat on and carpet rarely walked upon. While calling the police or animal control would have been a prudent choice, Anna determined securing the door took precedence.

*I don't want that thing to see me. Knowing it's still back there scares me enough.*

She began to make her way to the front foyer, dragging her right leg and grunting with each agonizing step.

*Donk.*

The sound and vibration emanated from the kitchen. Anna turned her head, fully expecting to see the beast relentlessly throwing its body against the thick glass.

*Donk.*

She looked at the glass doors and saw nothing slamming against them. Not even a leaf flew by from the heavy gusts outside.

*Thump.* It became louder.

The creature wanted in, but Anna couldn't determine where the noise was coming from. Just as she reentered the kitchen, the window above the sink shattered, and large shards of glass fell onto the counters. The massive beast crashed through the window, desperate to end this night. It yelped as it landed against the olive-colored refrigerator's front doors, now bruised from the impact with the handles. Anna's terrified cry was followed by a defeated moan, her survival uncertain. She turned to her right and opened the door to the closet under the stairs. There, she huddled in the small space, drawing her knees close to her chest and stifling her sobs by biting down on an old baseball glove, once cherished for playing catch with her dad.

*If there is a glove here, the has to be a—*

The wolf rolled onto its legs, slinging foamy, stringy saliva, ready to hunt Anna once more. The closet door had slats angled downwards, making it easy to look out but challenging to see inside. The dehydrated creature rasped, growling with an intimidating lowered brow, searching for Anna as foam spurted around its mouth from exhaustion. On the other side of the door, Anna watched as the wolf lurked. She exhaled long and deep through her nose, but she couldn't help it. As hard as she fought to control her breathing, it was enough to catch the beast's attention. *Oh, no.* Anna gently grabbed her old softball bat that had found a home against the closet wall and brought it close to her exhausted, sweat soaked face.

She watched as the werewolf inspected, hoping to find any noise to track. Anna couldn't allow that to happen. The wolf huffed and shook its body, releasing the wet blood and foam from its fur and mouth over the Blakes' bottom floor hallway. Slowly, it came to the front door, sniffed around the edges, and walked into the living area, tracking blood and mud onto the precious carpet her mother coveted. Anna waited in the tiny closet for hours, afraid to leave, not knowing if the strange creature still lingered in the halls and rooms of her house.

Phillip Blake pulled into his driveway, feeling somewhat inebriated. He knew it wasn't right to have alcohol in his system while operating a vehicle, but he regarded it as more of a guideline than a rule not to. His wife, Maria, was in a worse state in comparison. The tequila shots from the party and the warmth blowing from the car's vents had taken their toll. Maria had fallen asleep, only to wake when her head repeatedly hit the car window next to her. Phillip couldn't help but laugh each time it happened.



As Phillip stopped in the driveway, the house appeared strange to him. He noticed the front door was open, something he had specifically warned Anna to double check. *That girl. I swear to God. If a robber doesn't kill her, I will!*

"Stay in the car," he told his wife, who had no issue obeying, knowing she would fumble. With drunken concern, Maria asked, "Is everything okay?"

"It's probably fine. I want to check the house before you go in. I think Anna left the front door open after I asked her to double check before she left," Maria belched up her champagne, whispering, "Kind of your fault for not getting it fixed by now, tight ass." She wasn't wrong. The man was so frugal he would separate a two-ply roll of toilet paper, doubling his investment if he had the patience.

Phillip felt uneasy. He knew something was off as he walked along the brick walkway leading to the front door's steps. He could have easily entered through the side door leading to the laundry room, but the front troubled him. The door wasn't a smidgen open; it was wide. Phillip slowed his pace, noticing blood smeared on the front steps leading to the house, sobering him.

He pushed the door open more and stepped inside his vandalized home, looking at the bloody paw print, the filth on the walls, and the shattered glass on the kitchen floor.

"Anna?"

A shuffling came from the stairwell, startling him. Phillip saw his daughter's matted red hair and blood and grass stains on the bottom of her pink dress emerge from the closet with a baseball bat. "Daddy!" she cried, wanting him to leave the house and protect her. They could go anywhere for all Anna cared; she wanted out of the house. "What happened?" he worried, looking down to find an old towel wrapped around her leg, soaked from the blood from her wound, and a leather belt above it to slow the bleeding.

"An animal. A big animal. A wolf! A giant wolf! It came in through the door and attacked me in my room while I waited for—*oh god*—Jessie! He's dead! That thing murdered him! He's in the backyard by the fence."

Tiring of Anna's babbling, Phillip took her by the shoulders and whispered, "I don't doubt there was an animal in here. I'm sure Jessie's fine." He looked back down at Anna's leg and asked, "Can you walk

alright? Do you need to go to the hospital?" Anna nodded, touching her makeshift tourniquet, pleading, "Yeah, but we need to go now, please!"

"Did a dog do that?"

"It wasn't a dog! It was a huge—giant—a wolf!"

"Well, it seems like it's probably gone now."

"Just look out there, Daddy. Please! I'm telling you; his body is out there! I tried to escape but found him—dead!" Anna screamed, frustrated that her father was not taking her story seriously.

"Okay—okay. Just stay by the door and keep a lookout. I'm going to check out the rest of the house. Close the door and lock it," Phillip slowly instructed. Anna nodded as she kept the bat close to her chest and pushed the door, only not enough for it to close.

Phillip walked down the short hall to the kitchen, scoffing and cursing every time he saw some damage. "Jesus Christ," he sighed when he looked into the kitchen to find the window busted out and the refrigerator dented. "What the ever living shit? How big was this thing?"

"It was huge! I...I...dammit! I told you that!" Anna answered, barely making a sentence. *I already told you! Why don't you believe me?*

"Well, I doubt it's still here," Phillip huffed as he continued to survey the wreckage in the kitchen, his foot nudging the scattered glass fragments. He placed his hands on his waist, contemplating the mess. "Your mother is going to have a coronary when she sees this."

Anna's anxiety, however, was focused elsewhere. Her gaze darted around the room and up the stairs, her paranoia mounting. "Daddy, can you please check upstairs? I don't think it's gone; you know?"

Phillip hesitated with skepticism. "I'm sure it's fine," he retorted, his stance in the hallway and kitchen entrance.

Anna pleaded, "Please!"

"Anna," he sighed, meeting her anxious eyes, "animals don't tend to linger in one place for too long. They move on, looking for food or other trouble. I'm telling you—"

A dark shadow loomed behind Phillip, casting an ominous silhouette over him. Wrinkled lids gave way to piercing yellow eyes, and foul smelling teeth, flecked with bits of flesh, were bared as the wolf parted its jaws. Strings of saliva dripped from the bottom of its menacing muzzle, splattering onto Phillip's bald spot. He felt a warm, viscous substance land on his head, prompting an involuntary shudder. Trying to wipe it away, he

patted his scalp, only to realize the wetness between his fingers was far thicker than water. He brought his hand to his face, his heart racing as he recognized the heavy, translucent substance tinged with red. It was blood.

Anna's horrified scream sliced through the air as the wolf rose onto its hind legs, looming menacingly over her father. Its jaws unhinged, accommodating the top half of Phillip's head, confirming the dreadful truth of Anna's warnings.

The wolf's long canines came down onto Anna's father, piercing his eyes. Anna watched as the monster picked her father from the ground and began hurling his body back and forth. Phillip ignored the pain of his legs creating holes in his home's drywall, punching the beast as hard as possible, hoping it would force it to let go of him. Like his legs crashing into the walls, Phillip could feel the monster breaking his neck with every fling of its head. Crimson fluid oozed out of Phillip's face—a mix of blood and eye fluid surrounded the sharp edges of the wolf's incisors as it flung him about with every head tug.

Anna screamed at the wolf to let her daddy go, but it didn't. It never had any intention to do so, ignoring her screams. Her retaliation made it personal, and with the practical human sound of its mind now muted, the pure animal rage had taken over. It knew what it was doing. The werewolf knew Anna was in the closet. Instead of quickly depriving her of her life, it waited. It would murder her father now in front of Anna, wanting her to watch. It was bigger than a man with murderous intentions—cold, calculated, and patient. They say there are only two innocent things in the world: children and animals. This creature was neither.

Phillip stopped yelling.

His pain stopped when the wolf snapped his neck in half. Anna heard the crunch and began to mumble, "D—Dad. Daddy!" The wolf cut its big yellow dilated eyes at her, proud, taunting his kill, saying, *See what you made me do. I can do this all day.* Anna cried out, running towards the giant wolf with her baseball bat, ready to beat the hell out of it. The wolf growled and fell onto all fours again, anticipating her attack. Anna swung the bat downwards and smashed it against the wolf's forehead. It howled in agony, holding its head with its long, dark hands. It didn't take long for it to regain its bearings. Roaring at Anna, its dark pupils overtook the yellow irises, readying to end the night with one last kill.

Anna quickly twisted her body to run out of the front door. After two steps, Anna's foot caught her father's lifeless body, causing her to fall forward and land on her face. Her nose was bloody from her impact on the floor. Anna crawled towards the front door crying for help, unable to concentrate on her surroundings as the wolf slowly walked behind her, playing with its prey, growling. As the animal noises became louder and the claws scraped against hardwood, Anna knew she wouldn't escape. She made it to the front door as her vision returned.

Anna saw the wolf bring its hand forward, pushing its claws through her right leg, resting them against the cold floor on the other side. The red haired victim, wanting nothing more than to kiss a boy tonight, screamed for her dead father because, in the end, every girl wants their daddy. Her lower leg came apart more with every drag forward, still losing morsels of flesh and blood from the first time the beast bit into her. The once nicely polished wood floor now hosted a pond of The Blake's blood with bits of human bobbing on the surface. Anna stopped and turned towards the living room on the right and saw her kitty, Boot Boots Bittenbacher, hiding between the back of the couch and the wall.

*She's safe, at least.*

With worried eyes filled with water, Boots watched her favorite human dying. As the monster lingered above, Anna wondered, *Who will feed my kitty now?* Boots let out a weak meow as Anna laid her head on the floor to watch her cat, hoping she would escape their home. Tears shaped in Anna's eyes, knowing it would soon end. "I'm so so-r-ry," Anna forced, apologizing she wouldn't be around to love her anymore. Boots tilted her head and mewed, concerned for Anna's safety as the mongrel came closer.

The wolf shoved its claws into Anna's back and dragged her towards the kitchen, over her father's body and glass slicing her stomach, but the pain would be nothing compared to what came next. Before the wolf flipped her over with its large mouth, Anna looked at her father's twisted neck and open eyes.

"Daddy!" she tried to exclaim. Anna thought her hoarse voice was from the yelling. Staring at her daddy's open eyes because of his now twisted neck, hoping it was all a nightmare. Anna realized her disappearing voice came from the trauma inflicted on her body.

*This is it.*

“Please let me know—” Maria Blake sang in the car with the sounds of Huey Lewis's music playing through the speakers, feeling the warmth of the heater in the running vehicle. She was unaware of the events unfolding inside her house. Maria had been drinking heavily even before the party, and now she was passed out in the passenger seat, her head resting against the cold window.

As the song played, Maria's head jerked up, her bleary eyes struggling to focus, trying to rouse herself from an inebriated slumber. Glancing at the green digital clock on the center console, she realized it had been about ten minutes since her husband had gone into the house to check if everything was okay. Impatience welled up within her.

A dark figure, low to the ground near the front door caught Maria's hazy attention. She leaned closer to the driver's side window, attempting to discern what it was.

"It's an animal," she mumbled to herself. "What the hell is a dog doing in our house?"

Maria opened the car door and stood, peering over the vehicle's roof. Unaware of the true nature of the creature, she initially attempted to shoo it away. At first, the animal paid her no mind as it backed out of the front door, dragging something with it.

Her attempts to frighten it with random noises ceased when she noticed the animal carrying something in its mouth. The mongrel turned its head towards Maria, its yellow eyes locking onto hers.

Startled and uncertain, Maria quickly retreated into the safety of her car, locking all the doors. She watched as the animal approached her vehicle, seemingly excited to show her what it had in its mouth. Squinting in the dim light, Maria couldn't discern what the object was, but she knew one thing for sure: it wasn't a bone.

As it skulked closer to the car, what was in his mouth became obvious; a lower part of a leg, torn apart by teeth and claws. The ends of the portion were now shredded with dangling flesh as it slowly moved towards Maria, taunting her with it. Pieces of pink fabric were caked onto the bloody torn edges of skin, pasted on by still wet blood. Maria put her hands to her face and screamed at the wolf, recognizing her daughter's leg—the birthmark gave it away. The animal dropped the appendage onto the driveway and began to growl and snarl, hurling its head at the window, now coming for Maria. She yelled in terror, pressing the car horn as she begged God for it

not to be true. The deafening noise frightened the wolf and alarmed the neighbors.

Boots peeked from around the front door's corner as the wolf circled the car, looking for the path she would now travel because there was nothing left for her there—it wasn't home anymore. The cat escaped into the woods nearby. There would be no more love in their home after this. It was taken away by a creature many would never see—something many would never accept as truth, now or ever.

A werewolf.

NOWHERE,  
OHIO  
A Novel by  
Bryan Wayne Dull





# CHAPTER ONE

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# IT ALWAYS FEELS LIKE

*Somebody's watching me.*

Ryan Hatcher was sure of it.

Ever since he saw a dark figure outside his window staring at his room from the spruce tree outside his split level home a week ago, Ryan has had trouble sleeping. Not only in his bedroom but in other places as well. One time he thought it was a swell idea to take his pillow and baby blue blanket into the bathroom to sleep in the bathtub—it didn't last long.

He discovered the blue couch in the living room down the hall from his bedroom was the comfiest place to sleep after tossing and turning for an hour or two. Ryan remembered to bring his fuzzy grey and white slippers with the plush raccoon heads on each foot because, like his comfy blanket, it brought him ease. The entire upstairs, where the bedrooms and bathroom were, had hardwood flooring. The end of the house facing north was colder than the rest during the fall and winter.

Ryan woke up around two o'clock in the morning, gradually opening his eyes, not wanting to open them, afraid of what may be in front of him looking down, or worse, above. He looked between his lashes with fluttering eyelids, not seeing anything going bump in the night.

His hands and fingers hurt from clenching his fists. Recently, Ryan unintentionally began doing this at night, causing them to ache for a few minutes. It was a morning ritual where he stretched his hands, extending his fingers to relieve them. He couldn't say why he was so pensive when he slept. It was one thing to be defensive when awake; it was another when people were supposed to reenergize their bodies. Ryan always felt drained now, feeling the weight of the world on his back; school, girls, friends, bullies, and most of all, his family complications.

The hallway from where he lay was long and dark. Ryan couldn't hear a peep or creek, only the wind outside whistling. The closet at the end of the hall held towels and other toiletries. It was shielded by a door of inexpensive craftsmanship, its gold painted knob having started to chip away several months ago. However, that wasn't what caught Ryan's

attention. The once conspicuous gold knob, easily visible from the distant couch, was now conspicuously absent.

*I can't see the gold reflecting what light comes through,* Ryan thought, afraid his visitor had made its way inside his home. Behind Ryan were two windows letting the light from the streetlamps come through, one behind him and the other to his right. The curtains were drawn, but there was only so much illumination white linen draperies could block.

The shadow of a man blocked the closet door at the end of the hall. Ryan couldn't tell if it was the same dark man he had seen near the house. He didn't want to think about a second entity near his home, much less the one. It stood there. Ryan had once believed the darkness doesn't have eyes, but *why was it staring at me? Why else would it just stand there?*

Ryan remembered the night when he first saw the man outside his window. He had woken suddenly, feeling sluggish, hopping onto his knees above his mattress and opening the blinds. The streetlights created shadows of tree branches remaining still in the air. He stared outside, noticing nothing was new and everything in the Holiday Heights neighborhood was as dull as ever. *Nothing interesting ever happens here,* he thought to himself often, staring at houses down the road, wondering if others were awake.

A cascade of stretched shadows caught Ryan's peripheral vision. Initially attributing it to branches swaying in his yard, the movement abruptly ceased. Amidst the grass stood a figure, a man. Turning his head, Ryan focused on the outline materializing from the void. The shadow loomed, fixed on the house, its gaze unwavering. A palpable sense of waiting lingered in the air.

Ryan became concerned. He had been on edge about his home being invaded ever since his family returned from visiting his grandparents on his mother's side. They arrived home that day to find the house had been broken into. The perpetrators had broken in through his father's office next to the laundry room. Ryan never knew the exact details but saw they had defecated in the bathroom. Instead of flushing the toilet, they stuffed their good towels inside the bowl. Being of an innocent mind, Ryan asked if someone in the house forgot to flush the toilet before they left or if they were unable. *Were they embarrassed? Is that why they used the towels to cover it up?* Ryan didn't know any better then.

It was neither.

After a short investigation, police discovered it was the disgruntled brother of a girl who'd lost her job babysitting Ryan and his siblings. The babysitter let the kids ride their Big Wheels and bikes on the road without supervision. Ryan's mother fired the girl immediately. While Ryan and his family were in Cincinnati, the young woman's brother and a friend decided to break inside to wreak intestinal havoc. Nothing of any real value appeared missing, which relieved Ryan's mother. The two boys were arrested a month later for breaking and entering. The break-in happened many years ago, but Ryan was always afraid they would retaliate. The dark figure was undoubtedly neither one of them; it was older. Ryan wasn't sure how he knew, but it looked like the shape of an older man.

Ryan, a constant bundle of nerves and anxiety, was the child who brought a palpable tension to the household. His sister, Layla, embodied the free spirit, while his older brother, Devin, exuded attitude. It seemed fitting Ryan, amidst the trio, yearned for carefree moments. Desiring to have fun, he grappled with a sense of responsibility often interfering with his pursuits. He was always ready for the worst because he was the middle child—at least that's what his mom told him. He tried to relax, but thoughts of the worst possible scenarios inevitably came to mind. Even fantasies about being in the movies were wrecked by his own pessimism. It was no wonder he couldn't sleep with all his worries.

The shadow continued to face the house. Ryan turned his hand to the window and apprehensively waved at it. The darkness looked up with two tiny white eyes. He jumped back and buried himself under his covers. *If ghosts are real, I hear they just want to be seen or heard and don't want to hurt anyone most of the time*, he remembered his mother telling him. Ryan thought they shouldn't look so scary if they wanted to be seen badly. The being always stood in the same area, near the same tree, facing the house. It never moved or bothered anyone or anything other than Ryan's nerves—

Until tonight.

It made its way into the confines of the house. Ryan couldn't ascertain whether it was the same entity or if what he witnessed held any semblance of reality. It appeared the same, short with hunched shoulders, maybe even bald. It wasn't a case of mistaking a coat rack for someone in your room. There was nothing at the end of the hallway but a door.

The blackness shivered.

The shadow began to move closer, patient with its steps. Ryan pulled his blanket up to his nose like a small child would. The black mass outlined with dark grey stopped before coming to his little sister's bedroom door. *Was it confused*, he wondered, glancing down, curious if it resembled feet. A week ago, he could have sworn it was coming for him, but now he questioned whether it wanted someone else. A defeated moan came from the spirit as it lingered within the hall, descending the stairs and out to the front yard again.

Ryan jumped to his knees, placing them comfortably on the couch cushions he spilt paint on months prior, concealing it from his parents by turning them over. Ryan witnessed the ghost's legs moving for the first time, walking towards the blue spruce near where he initially saw it. *What does it want?* Ryan stared until the being disappeared in the blink of an eye, or as his mother would say, *it went cracking along*.

A thumping came from down the hallway. Ryan looked over and saw nothing, not a ghost or shadow. The squeal of a door opening echoed, and Ryan took refuge by immediately falling flat and covering his body. *It's coming for me!*

The hardwoods began to creak. The thing creating the dreadful noise was unsure of what it wanted. Another door opened down the hall, but Ryan was too frightened to look above his fabric shelter. "Where is he?" a voice asked from down the way.

*Tump..tump..tumtumtumtumtump.*

The sound of footsteps stomping through the house became quicker and louder the closer it got to Ryan. He squinted his eyes, ready for the sheets to be torn away. Ryan clutched the fabric and held it close, hoping to overpower the being coming for him.

Whatever was on the other side tugging, it had difficulty pulling the blanket from Ryan. A person on the other side became frustrated, huffing and moaning with every pull. "Ryan! Why are you on the couch?"

It wasn't a ghost, ghoul, or demon; Ryan's mother became peevish.

Ryan uncovered himself to see his mother hovering over him with one hand on her hip and the other rubbing her stomach. "You need to sleep in ye room, son," she sighed. Ryan sat up, looked around the dark living room, and pleaded, "I can't sleep in my room. Can't I just stay out here?"

"No," she immediately replied, frowning with the side of her mouth. "We bought a house so you can have a room and not live like a bridge and

tunnel hobo hangin' outside a train station." Ryan scoffed, threw his legs over the end of the blue couch with tiny pink flowers sewn in the fabric, and placed them on the floor.

"What's the matta with ya?" she asked with her British accent.

"I don't see what difference it makes."

Rebecca Hatcher, Ryan's mother, began to put it all together. She had forgotten what he had told her about the dark man in the yard outside his window. She didn't want to think it possible. Her sensitivity to what we have yet to understand about the afterlife may have been passed down to Ryan, perhaps her other children. Ryan watched his mother take in what he told her, holding her stomach with one hand while twirling the streak of white hair appearing recently. Everyone noticed but said nothing. His mother was sick. She had been for a while now. The last thing she wanted to hear was about her new white streak of hair in front coming down the side of her head, making her feel old.

"Is your stomach acting up again?" Ryan asked, being the concerned son he is. Rebecca shrugged her shoulders. "No better, no worse. It is what it is."

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" There was no fooling him. He knew the signs of what his mother was dealing with, and all he asked for was a straight answer, "Remember? Don't put your kid gloves on, please. That's not me. We agreed."

"This comin' from the boy who still hides under his sheets," she chuckled. Ryan wasn't amused. Not because of the remark calling him a big baby, but his mother's avoidance of the question. Rebecca shook her head and acknowledged she needed to stop thinking of her boy as a child, "Nothing you should worry about right now, luv."

Rebecca took Ryan gently by the arm and guided his body to stand. Exhausted, Ryan looked down the stairs at the front door as they walked by to make sure nothing malevolent lingered. They arrived at his room. Ryan fell onto his bed and asked, "Will you tell me when I should?"

"Should what, luv?"

"When I should worry about you." It was a silly question because he would always worry about his mother. Rebecca looked at her little boy as she breathed in, debating how to answer him. Rebecca rarely lied to her children about anything. She felt they had a right to know what waited for them, but not this—*not yet*.



“Of course,” she fibbed. She couldn’t fathom being honest about her condition to her children. How do you tell your children when it is time for their mother to die? Enough was happening at home right now. Why make it worse?

His mother leaned down, put her skinny, shriveled fingers through his hair, and told him goodnight. Ryan mumbled goodnight to his mother before turning his head away. Rebecca lightly crept out of the room, attempting to keep the floor from creaking. She shut the door behind her and walked across the hall, through the area in front of the closet. A sudden blast of cold caused her body to shiver. She could then acknowledge maybe her son didn’t imagine his boogeyman. She entered her big bedroom with her big, empty bed and fell into it. It had been a few months since she kicked her husband out of the house, but it was still hard to get used to him not being next to her.



# CHAPTER TWO

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# A LITTLE RESPECT

Rebecca was puzzled over her inexplicable urge to purchase breakfast foods recently, making the children's meals excessively sweet. In their younger years, the kids were finicky eaters, and pancakes with syrup and sugary cereals were a strategy to coax something into their stomachs. Serving it wasn't exactly her delight, but at least they would eat. A cup of Sanka coffee had left her abdomen feeling swollen, and only water seemed to go down smoothly, as the proximity of something sinister loomed in her thoughts—*something is here*, she thought.

Ryan woke to the framed poster of Corvettes spanning from 1953 to 1986. He couldn't recall when or why he had acquired it. The wallpaper, adorned with images of vintage vehicles from the 30s and 40s, puzzled him. *Why this wallpaper? Why so many cars?* Perhaps his father, in a subtle attempt, tried to infuse certain objects to shape him into a more "manly" individual. It failed—he remained a nerd.

The room felt cold, a common occurrence in the old house. The hardwood floor on the top level necessitated the use of his raccoon slippers, strategically placed next to his bed to avoid direct contact. The scent of coffee, which he never indulged in, roused him on that Sunday morning—the day his mother brewed the good stuff. Unlike the routine fare of basic breakfast foods on other days, Sundays were dull for Ryan. He had to find ways to amuse himself within the confines of the house or the neighborhood. However, this particular Sunday held promise; the newest issue of Eastman and Laird's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, issue seventeen, had been released. Ryan was determined to obtain it.

As Ryan ambled down the hall, his brother Devin emerged from his room with exuberance, darting in front of him. Devin playfully lifted his leg and unleashed a flatulent assault, directing an invisible odorous cloud towards Ryan's face. "Morning, dorkus!" Fanning away the smell, Ryan retorted, "God! You are so obnoxious!"

An assertive "Oy!" resonated from the kitchen, where their mother scolded them both, unwilling to ascertain the culprit. Ryan no longer took offense; he just hadn't figured out how to turn it to his advantage. Little did Devin know; he would soon regret tormenting his younger brother—regret it deeply. *Who says "rue the day" anyway?*

"It's too early to put up with your shenanigans," Rebecca scolded. Devin, who would typically roll his eyes or offer insincere apologies, remained uncharacteristically serious. "Okay, mom," Devin replied. Witnessing his brother's sincerity was a novel experience for Ryan. Things were different now.

The kitchen table presented a choice between delectable chocolate chip pancakes or the tempting Strawberry Shortcake cereal—either option could be considered a subset of diabetes. Ryan and Devin opted for the pancakes, generously drowning their stacks in maple syrup. The aesthetically pleasing pink breakfast cereal, however, was intended more for their younger sister, Layla.

Layla awoke to pastel-colored flowers adorning off-white wallpaper, infusing her with a jolt of energy from its prettiness. Like her brothers, she caught a whiff of coffee, but she took extra time to emerge from her room adorned with floral walls and pink linens. Layla's top morning priority was acknowledging her stuffed animals and dolls. Though unspoken, her favorite was Lucy—the Cabbage Patch Kid she had adopted. Layla occasionally felt a pang of guilt about leaving them, fearing her other toys would become lonely. Luckily, she had devised a solution—Teddy Ruxpin would entertain them with a story.

With her typical bounce in her step, Layla walked out of her room. Ryan often imagined his sister having her own jaunty music playing in her imagination as she moved from one room to another. Her happiness was paramount, even if her brothers occasionally teased her about it. Today, she seemed exceptionally cheerful.

"Ello, mummy!" she greeted.

Devin rolled his eyes at her exuberant entrance, and Ryan chuckled. Layla put on a thick accent at home, dropping it when the parents weren't around. Ryan couldn't judge; he himself mimicked accents when encountering someone with one. Perhaps it was an automatic attempt to fit in. It happened infrequently in Norton, Ohio—a town gradually fading from maps as the years passed and the font grew smaller.

"Hello, love. Your cereal is on the table. Grab a bowl," Rebecca instructed.

"Mmmm. Strawberry Shortcake. How delectable," Layla shimmied.

Devin's ears perked, hearing a noise from his sister's room closest to the kitchen. "Did you leave your possessed bear on again?" It took a moment

for Layla to understand what he was referring to. "Teddy is not possessed. That's what he does! He tells stories!" Layla yelled.

"Are you sure he's not teaching them Satan's will?" Devin joked.

"Mother! Devin's saying my toy is the devil, again!"

"Devin! What'd we say about talkin' about Satan at the kitchen table?"

Devin sipped on his glass of milk, ignoring both of them. "Don't worry, love. If the devil possesses anything, it's your brutha."

Ryan and Layla laughed as Devin did not find it humorous. He could dish out insults like most people but couldn't take them when thrown back. Usually, he would have a comeback, but Devin decided to let it go.

Rebecca leaned against the counter in front of the window and watched her kids eat their food. She felt weak today but wanted to give them a decent meal. Ryan was the first to finish his food. He picked up his plate and walked to the kitchen's entryway to provide a running start to slide on the linoleum manufactured to appear like bricks, two horizontally then two vertically. Ryan wanted to attempt the longest slide to the sink today as he counted back from three. Devin and Layla stopped to watch what could have been the most extraordinary feat in Ryan's young life.

He took off in a quick dash, stopping and letting the inertia carry him the rest of the way, weighing his legs to get the maximum slide. Ryan was confident he would make it; secretly, everyone wanted him to. He was so close, then his right foot slipped, causing him to nearly fall. The siblings laughed, but it was farther than he had gotten before, and one day he would make it to the kitchen sink.

"Where are you in such a hurry to get to?" Rebecca asked.

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and answered, "Going to go get Scott and walk to the Loyal Oak to get the latest Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle comic issue." Not having the foggiest clue what had come out of her son's mouth, Rebecca replied, "Oh! That sounds nice!" Devin scoffed and shook his head. "What is the deal with these turtles? Isn't there a cartoon coming on now?" It was the moment Ryan was waiting for, the chance to nerdsplain.

"That's cool and all, but it's not like the comics. The comics are much grittier, with more violence and adult language. The cartoon is for kids, but the comic can be brutal. That, and they all have red bandanas instead of different colors. You can tell who is who by the weapons Master Splinter gave them after an alien ooze mutated them when they were little. He

named them after Italian Renaissance artists; Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and Michelangelo."

Devin stared at his brother, not understanding why he was so different from most kids, listening to what was probably someone's fever dream originally. "Thank God you explained. For a moment, I thought it was going to be something stupid." Ryan detected the sarcasm in his voice.

Their mother shot a disapproving look at Devin for attempting to dampen Ryan's enthusiasm about his hobby. "Sounds pretty cool, Ryan," she reassured. "Just have fun today before you have to go to school tomorrow."

Ryan nodded and proceeded to get dressed for the day. Rebecca sighed, then asked, "Are you going with the Donovans for trick-or-treating tomorrow?" Devin, nonchalant, replied, "Probably. I mean, it's always what we do, isn't it?" Rebecca nodded in agreement.

"Do we have to, though? I mean, there are other people," Devin suggested.

"I think it's nice. They're good friends—even if your father and theirs haven't seen eye to eye since your dad changed jobs."

"I'm going to feel out of place. Valerie will have Eric with her, Ryan will have his little girlfriend, Christina, and then Scott. Then there's this little suck up," he said, thumb pointing at his sister.

Layla giggled and chimed in, "I like Christina. She's nice to me."

Rebecca's neutral expression turned into a frown. She didn't care much for Christina, finding her overly needy when it came to Ryan, though strangely having no issue with them hanging out with Eric. The limited options in their small town meant Eric probably needed to be in juvenile detention. There was something about how Christina looked at her son; mothers rarely relished the idea of another woman capturing their son's attention.

Devin ran his hand through his dark hair, resembling his father's. He blew out air, creating a flapping noise with his lips, indicating dissatisfaction. Shifting from the conversation, he approached his mother and asked, "You feeling alright today? Need anything?" Rebecca smiled, placed her frail hand on his shoulder, and told him, "Just a bit tuckered. I think I'll take a nap after you all jog off. LayLoo takes care of herself most of the time. I'll be alright." She winked at her son, hoping he wouldn't worry any more about her, *at least for today*.

A red '86 Mazda 626 rolled down the Hatcher's lengthy gravel driveway. Melvin Craggs, their neighbor, happened to be outside unloading materials from his mustard colored '79 Ford Courier as the car pulled in. Craggs knew who it was, and he was far from thrilled.

Calvin Hatcher, the dark haired, thick bearded, overweight alcoholic father who hadn't lived with his family for months, had decided to pay a visit. It was all Melvin knew, and it was all he wanted to know. A tired man in his mid-thirties, he felt worn far too young.

They didn't get along.

Most of the animosity stemmed from a disagreement about erecting a fence in the Hatcher's backyard to shield Melvin's neglected pool—the sole pool in the Holiday Heights subdivision that, despite its presence, remained untouched throughout the years. It was a disappointment for many, especially those craving a swim in the summer. Unpleasant words were exchanged, creating palpable tension between the two. Melvin chose to ignore him while Cal acted obnoxious, often giving a sarcastic "how do you do" if his neighbor was outside. Today was no different.

"Hey there, Melvin!" Calvin shouted as he exited his car, wearing a Cheshire cat grin. Melvin, with his upper lip curled and one eye squinted, raised his old arthritic hand, managing to flip the middle finger in the air. Cal laughed and pointed, "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Melvin."

Melvin observed as Calvin approached the front door, struggling to find the right key. Muttering obscenities under his breath, *shit, dammit, son of a bitch*, each time he selected the wrong key, he finally found the correct one. It shouldn't have taken so long—the house key was marked with an H to make it easier to find. Calvin's mind, however, had become so frazzled over the last few weeks he'd forgotten.

"Is anyone here?" Cal called out, stumbling over the foot on the door, forgetting to step up. His voice echoed through the hall, and each family member had their reaction. Rebecca, his wife, was annoyed. Devin was angered by his sudden appearance. Ryan, indifferent. Layla, excited.

Layla hopped from her place at the table and ran down the first set of stairs. "Daddy!" she exclaimed. Calvin put his arms out, and Layla threw herself at him, holding onto him with a squeeze, a sigh, and a twinkle in her eye. "Are you coming with us for Trick or Treat, Daddy?" she asked, hopeful he wouldn't back out.



"Of course. I mean, I won't be getting candy because I'm an old man," Calvin chuckled, as Rebecca loomed from the top of the stairs. "Go finish your breakfast, LayLoo," Rebecca ordered, her anger evident at the sudden visit from her estranged husband.

"Hey, Dad!" Ryan shouted from the kitchen.

"Hey, bud!"

Ryan remained in his spot, aware of the routine. Dad would come in; Mom would get angry and talk to him far from the kids in a low tone. Only after this would he get to visit his dad. Still, he was happy his dad seemed more content when he was around the kids. Rebecca descended with stomps, showing her frustration. "You can't just come into the house. We've talked about this. You don't live here anymore." Calvin shrugged confidently, retorting, "Seeing as how I am paying the mortgage, and my kids live here, I'm going to trump that statement."

"You want to play that card, do you?"

Cal raised his hands, seeking a temporary truce. "There are some things in my office. Let me just get them, and I'll be out of your hair until tomorrow when the kids go out for Halloween." Rebecca inhaled deeply through her nose, claiming defeat. She gestured towards the second set of stairs leading to the family room. "Go ahead." He descended the stairs with a smile filled with unobtrusive sarcasm and arrogance, and Rebecca rolled her eyes. She acted annoyed, but truthfully, it was cute coming from him. It always had been.

The lower floor of the Hatcher split-story home was nearly one big room with a closet next to the garage entrance and a laundry room connected to Cal's office, opposite the stairs. The room wasn't large; it held a filing cabinet and a small desk with a word processor and a glass case housing his gun collection. The big, gaudy case was made of polished wood and red velvet lining. It wasn't where all his guns were contained, just the more expensive ones.

Rebecca despised having guns in the house; her family never had one in Manchester, England, where she grew up. After Devin was born, they found their home in Norton. It was a good price for Cal's salary at Seiberling Tire & Rubber Co. in Barberton, a neighboring town, until it closed in 1980. Half an acre—an irresistible opportunity. Beyond the house, acres of woods stretched, connecting to various areas, including the neighboring town of Wadsworth.

Calvin's reason for owning guns was to be ready to defend the house if undesirables emerged. There was no telling who lived in those woods, and he wouldn't feel safe without a weapon. Rebecca reluctantly agreed, though she suspected her husband was a bit full of himself. One weapon turned into two until she put her foot down, turning it into a knife collection.

"Do you still have the key for this if you need it?" Calvin asked Rebecca, who quietly stood in the doorway of his office. "Yeah. It's in the shoebox on the top shelf of our closet, along with the other five pieces of firepower you have hiding. You have enough now your sons could dual wield them." Calvin snickered, making his way back to the family room, avoiding the metal pole in the laundry area, stopping to take in the view.

The Hatcher family room had one couch, chair, a television set, and a Hi-Fi system with a Samsung dual cassette player, a Sansui turntable, and a Kenwood receiver connected to two speakers. The walls had wood paneling, giving it a log cabin look. It wasn't the best decorated room; the carpet needed updating and was drafty, but it held some of their best moments. Every year, the Christmas tree stood in the corner next to the stairs, making Cal curse every time he had to get under it to water it. The flat railing going down the last part of the stairs leading to the entrance landing was fun. The kids would slide down whenever they watched television or played the Atari 2600.

"You can't keep doing this, Cal," Rebecca said, interrupting Calvin's recollections. "It confuses them. Makes them think you're coming back."

"I am coming back, though, at some point," he replied. Rebecca knew what he meant but wanted to move on from the certainty. "How are you feeling?"

Rebecca sighed, "Can't eat anything. It's hard to, you know? Just putting down water when I can and resting. My stomach hurts a lot, but that's the nature of this beast, isn't it?"

Calvin winced at the idea of his wife in pain. "Are you sure there's nothing—"

"Yeah, Cal. I have stage four stomach cancer. I'm quite sure there's not much else we can do unless you know more than the doctors." Calvin wanted to yell at her for dismissing his feelings. Instead, he patted the files he had grabbed from his office, gaining the courage to say what was needed. "I think I should move back in."

"Are you pissed?" Rebecca jeered, asking if Calvin was drunk.

"No. I haven't had a drink in a month now. I'm cleaning up my act, and I think it would be good for me to come back."

"No way!"

"Fine. Just hear me out," Cal said before catching his breath. *Here it goes.* "You know the doctors have only given you a couple of weeks now. Do one of the kids, or all three, need to be the ones to call the ambulance? Do they need to be the ones to find you passed away on our bed? Is it fair to them to see their mother's corpse?" Rebecca folded her arms and pressed her lips together, allowing her husband to continue. "If... when... they need to know, it's better coming from me."

Rebecca shook her head, resisting the urge to disagree. "You know I'm right, Bec. It would break your heart knowing your kids would discover your body in your final moments. What if Layla was the one?"

"Fine! I get it," she moaned with anger in her voice. "They might still be the ones to find me or to call the ambulance."

Cal threw his arms in the air. "Maybe, but I have vacation time. Let me take these last weeks off and be around." Rebecca folded her arms, contemplating his proposal but realized she needed more time.

"I'll think about it. What you did that night was unforgivable, and I need to figure out if I can let it go, even with what time I got left." Rebecca's *death day*, as she referred to it, was coming sooner than she wanted to admit, and while the kids knew of her cancer, they never knew when. Cal and Rebecca thought it best not to tell them the timeframe because counting down to the roundabout time of your loved ones' death is something children should never have to do.

Calvin nodded and began to ascend the stairs. "I hope you do." She watched her husband walk up the stairs to talk to the kids and hated how much she wanted him to come home and forget everything, even for a few weeks. Marriage is hard sometimes, but when your spouse realizes they're not the person they thought or wanted to be in life, it's difficult for both.

Cal visited two of his kids for a small amount of time, talking to Ryan and Layla about what was going on and how they would be dressed for Halloween the next day. Devin remained in his room, playing his tapes as he read the latest issue of Rolling Stone with Keith Richards on the cover. A knock on the door forced Devin to pull down the Koss headphones his father had purchased at Musicland with his employee discount.

"What!" Devin knew by the gentle knock who it was, his little brother. Ryan opened his door enough to stick his head inside.

Devin's room was a far cry from what Ryan's was. While Ryan let his mother decorate his room, Devin took another approach and decided to do it himself. Multiple posters of bands and Elle Macpherson were taped above his blue and white striped wallpaper. Band posters with mostly black backgrounds covered—U2, Guns 'n Roses, Motley Crue, and INXS. It wasn't Ryan's thing, yet he was more of a Tears for Fears and Huey Lewis and the News guy. Ryan couldn't help but gawk at his room. "What is it, turd biscuit?"

"You coming out?" Ryan asked.

"Why?" Devin asked, already knowing the answer.

"To talk to dad before he leaves."

"Nope. I don't have anything to say to him. Let him go back to his shitty apartment downtown."

Ryan sighed, frustrated, not understanding why Devin was against seeing their father. Ever since Cal moved out, there was an immediate animosity that hasn't let up. There was nothing Ryan could say that would stick, so all he could do was shrug it off and move on with the rest of the day. "Fine. I'll see you later then. I'll tell Valerie you said hi," Ryan said, taunting his big brother by making kissy faces and mocking him.

Devin put on his headphones, blasting the *Appetite for Destruction* record until curiosity overcame him. "Wait! What are you doing?" he asked, making his voice higher at the end. Ryan, who had almost closed the door, grinned and poked his head through. "God, you're so predictable. When she comes into the picture, you become interested," Ryan thought.

"I'm going over to Scott's, and we're going to go to the market to pick up my comic and some Garbage Pail cards." Looking up in the air, Devin thought of an excellent excuse to go with him to have a way to see Valerie, Scott's older sister.

"Let me take you in the Turbo," Devin said, sounding more like a demand to Ryan.

"Why do you do this to yourself? You know she's dating that asshole, Eric, who—by the way—is the guy in the neighborhood you hang out with," Ryan pointed out.

"Is it wrong to stop by? Mom and dad were good friends with their parents," Devin justified.

"Yeah. *Were*—being the word, meaning past tense. Scott and Valerie's parents have nothing to do with it," Ryan pointed out, pulling Devin's excuse from under him.

"Just let me take you!"

"Five bucks."

"What? No! I'm doing you the favor here!" Devin insisted.

"Uh. No," Ryan retorted with his finger in the air. He had the power now, which was rare, so he would marinate in it for as long as possible. "I'm doing you the favor here, lover boy." *Ah yes!* The taste of your desperation is delicious! Devin reached into his dresser drawer and found a wadded up five-dollar bill. "Here," he pouted, throwing the cash at Ryan. "See you downstairs," Ryan sang as he closed his brother's door.

With his head held high from the extra money he had scammed from his older brother; Ryan went to the end of the hall to let his mother know they were about to leave and told his dad goodbye. After being interrogated for several minutes, Rebecca gave her permission to use her car, The Turbo. It was a nickname for a brown Dodge Daytona with 'Turbo' printed on the back doors. Ryan grabbed the keys from the homemade key holder screwed near the kitchen entrance Devin made in shop class two years ago when he was a freshman and headed downstairs.

Directly across the top of the stairs was Layla's bedroom. Rebecca always feared in the back of her mind her little LayLoo would get up in the middle of the night and accidentally fall. Luckily, it has never happened in the six years they have lived on Greengate Drive.

Ryan glanced inside his sister's room between the door and its frame, between the hinges, and saw Layla patting her Cabbage Patch Kid on the back, pretending to make it burp. The usual cadence for Layla was taking care of her dollies and playing Suzie homemaker on the weekends. She was in her room by herself when she played. Now there was someone else with her.

Ryan's heart skipped a beat when he saw a pair of crisscrossed legs with tattered, blood-drenched white tights leading to a pink dress—*that's not my sisters*. The skin under the bloodied socks was grey with protruding blue veins, shredded. A young girl sat in front of his sister as she played. The meat of the right leg lay on the beige carpet, shifting in front of Layla as the girl moved. All this with a single glance as he froze, unsure what to do. The body jerked, cracking the bones in its decayed body. Ryan flinched and

jumped into Layla's room, ready to save his sister from the spirit he may have seen last night.

Layla saw Ryan's shadow outside her room, so it didn't frighten her when he jumped in. Ryan stopped and looked in her room and found nothing that would hurt his sister. Confused, he looked down towards Layla to see her equally so. "What is it?"

"I, uh, was there...everything okay?" Ryan stammered. Layla gently nodded her head with a blank stare. "Okay. Sorry, I guess. Thought I heard something." Of course, he didn't, though, as he made up a white lie to save himself from embarrassment. Ryan backed himself back into the hallway and walked down the stairs to wait for Devin to finish attempting to make himself more attractive to his friend's sister.

Layla waited for Ryan to go downstairs before she spoke. "It's okay," she said to the presence, "He means well." Layla calmly walked over to her tea set on her white dresser and sweetly asked her freshly tattered friend, "Was there something you wanted to talk about?"



# CHAPTER THREE

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# VALERIE

There wasn't much time for Devin to express what needed to be said. The car ride to the Donovans was only a couple of blocks away. Ryan would have spoken sooner if he wasn't preoccupied comparing his clothes to his brother's. He wore a red long sleeve Lacoste polo with the alligator on the chest, while Devin sported an unbuttoned blue and grey flannel with a plain black shirt underneath. Had their mother known they had left without a coat or hoodie; she would have *a proper go* at them later. The leaves in the neighborhood turned vibrant shades, a beautiful sight during autumn, but now wasn't the time to admire the changing scenery; it was time to talk.

"You need to start talking to Dad again. He looked bummed you didn't want to talk earlier," Ryan began. Devin gently shook his head, disappointment evident in his expression. "No. I don't," Devin replied. Ryan looked ahead, Scott's house just over the hill. "He's going to have to come back home at some point, you know. It's only a matter of time until Mom—" "I know! Jesus!" Devin interrupted, his anger briefly surfacing. "Look, there are some things you don't know. Don't need to." "Then tell me. Explain why our father is so terrible." With tightened lips, Devin slapped the steering wheel, frustrated, wanting to reveal the truth to his brother but knowing no good could come from it, at least not right now. "That man is not our dad. Something happened to him a while back. He's just some kind of husk now. I don't know if we will ever see our dad the way he was."

Ryan couldn't argue with him. Their dad had changed over the past couple of years, and while Devin knew part of the reason, Ryan and Layla remained ignorant. *Well, maybe Layla didn't notice.* To her, her daddy could never do anything wrong. It must be nice to be young and innocent. Cal became so lost in work and alcohol he had forgotten what he had been working for—their family and their future.

The driveway to the Donovan's ranch-style home loomed ahead, and anxiety overcame Ryan. Rick Donovan, the father, was intimidating. He was large, mean, and most of the time, drunk by noon. Because Rick and their father had worked together, Rick felt animosity towards Calvin, maybe jealousy.

Norton, Ohio, was a bedroom community for people who worked in Akron, mostly plant workers. It was the same with Wadsworth and Barberton, the towns next to them. Akron was a significant cog in the Midwestern Rust Belt machine, and Rick Donovan and Calvin Hatcher were supervisors in the B.F. Goodrich plant manufacturing aircraft tires and other products. Calvin was initially brought in to work the line but was soon promoted, given his popularity and leadership qualities. Rick was already a supervisor and welcomed Cal with open arms.

They worked well together and just so happened to live in the same development. They would soon hang out at one another's houses and come around whenever they wanted, like friends on network sitcoms. Life, however, was not easy. The duo would eat at Lou and Hy's Deli on Market Street and munch on a Rueben sandwich every other Sunday with their kids as they became friends and remained so over the years. Unfortunately, a recession happened in Akron, and times began to change.

Because of his management skills in manufacturing and retail, Calvin was offered to be a district manager for Musicland in 1987, trading his blue collar for white. Rick understood the reasons and the money and wished his friend good luck. He remained with the plant until a few months later when B.F. Goodrich halted production, eliminating eight hundred jobs. The company moved its offices to Chicago, removing any hope Rick would get his job back sometime later.

Over the last year, Rick and his family managed to survive with sixty percent of his salary as compensation. His savings and some part-time money from work were immediately blown through. Rick eventually had an emotional breakdown, creating anxiety ridden, hateful, overweight, and alcohol dependence. While Rick was deep in depression, Calvin still worked but felt miserable and leaned towards beer and liquor, a vice that would split the household apart. Two men, once good friends, were now spiraling downward, sharing more in common on an emotional level than they realized.

The Turbo rolled to a halt in the driveway. Scott stood, anticipating Ryan's arrival for their walk to the store. As the brothers emerged from the car, Scott remarked, "I thought we were walking." Ryan, nonchalant, gestured towards Devin, implying driving was his brother's idea. "We are. My brother wanted to come and stare at your sister's knockers."

Devin's mouth hung open, struggling to grasp the newfound boldness in his younger brother. Swiftly smacking the back of Ryan's head, Devin scolded, "Shut up, you little knob gobbler!" Though the sting lingered, Ryan wore a satisfied grin; the pain was a small price to pay.

Curious, Devin inquired about Scott's sister. "Is your sister here?" Scott, slyly glancing at Ryan, decided to tease. "Why do you want to see her?"

"To talk about tomorrow."

"Okay. Why do you want to see her—really?" Scott whispered the last word, aiming to be irritating.

"That's *really* a big ol' case of none of your business," Devin whispered back, attempting to assert dominance. Unfazed, Scott, bolder than Ryan, met Devin's towering presence. Ryan's more laid-back demeanor complemented Scott's assertiveness, creating a balance in their friendship.

Scott pulled his Ohio State hoodie over his head, locking eyes with Devin. "You're not going to do a damn thing. You know why? If you lay a finger on me, my sister will never go out with you, like you had much of a chance anyway." Sneering, Devin proceeded to the front door to see Scott's sister.

Leaning against the car, Scott and Ryan braced themselves for the inevitable spectacle of Devin trying to converse with a girl. While Devin wasn't lacking in attractiveness, his awkwardness and attitude around the opposite sex gave off an eccentric vibe.

Devin's hand trembled as he pressed the doorbell button, initiating a worn chime, a melody of years past. This encounter could swing either way—maybe a successful conversation or, worst case scenario, an awkward encounter with Scott's dad in his underwear. Devin prayed fervently for the former.

The door creaked open slowly, unveiling Valerie Donovan, a five-foot-six blonde goddess. She stood with her hand in her hair, adjusting the scrunchie holding it to the side. Valerie sported purple leggings, a black leotard paired with pink leg warmers gathered at the bottom, and a cropped white sweatshirt adorned with a faded Miami Vice logo. *Even in casual settings, whether working out or lounging at home, she exuded an aura reminiscent of Venus herself*, Devin admired as he couldn't help but think of the Bananarama song; there was something about her ignited a desire for romance, yet anxiety surged through, momentarily robbing him of coherent speech.

"Hey! What's up?" she greeted with a smile, but Devin drew a blank. The topics he planned to discuss mere minutes ago evaporated from his mind. The ensuing conversation resembled the antics of the mentally challenged buzzard from the Looney Tunes cartoons.

"Uh, I, uh, tomorrow. The thing. Trick or treating! Are we still, um, you know... like... going to meet up at a certain time?" he stammered.

Observing from the driveway, Ryan and Scott marveled at Devin's ineptitude in conversing with a girl. "Dude," Scott remarked, elbowing Ryan in the arm, "This is making my coochie dry up, and I'm not even a chick." Ryan nodded, witnessing the train wreck unfold before him.

"Oh yeah! I think we are going to meet at your house at six or seven. I think," Valerie replied, giggling at the end of her sentence. Devin cherished her laugh. If she were a glass of champagne, her laugh would be the bubbles floating to the top, tickling your mouth.

"Who's that at the door?" a booming voice resonated from inside the house. Valerie rolled her eyes, anticipating her father's potential embarrassment. "Just Devin and Ryan, dad," she sighed. Rick's heavy steps approached the front door, and a massive, hulking figure holding a Coors emerged, grinning. "The Hatcher brothers. What made you ring my doorbell today, forgetting Ryan was a regular to the house?" Mouth hanging open, uncertain how to respond, Devin replied, "Finalizing plans for tomorrow, sir. Are you coming?"

Rick groaned, "I suppose. The whole damn street is hanging out to make sure none of you get into any trouble." He stopped and pointed to Valerie with his thumb. "This one is dating the troublemaker. Not sure we have to worry about the rest."

"Ugh! God, dad! He's not bad!" Valerie deflated. Rick ignored his daughter's attitude and focused on grilling Devin.

"Your dad still managing the music stores?" Rick asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Yeah. Well—I guess he was the smart one to leave. Here I am, waiting for something big to come my way."

"Something will turn up," Devin said, attempting to get into the father's good graces. Rick sneered, looked Devin up and down, and then over to Ryan. "I bet you guys aren't doing too bad with all those fat checks your dad is raking in," Rick insinuated, becoming angry. The rude, insinuating statement annoyed Devin, bringing out his actual personality of being a

smart ass. "I wouldn't know. He's not living with us right now, and even if he was, I'm not his accountant."

Valerie tucked in her lips, holding back laughter. Devin looked over at her and smiled, proud he made her laugh at her father's shortcomings. Rick sucked his teeth, debating on engaging in insults, but to Valerie's surprise, he backed down and said, "I hope your mom is doing okay." Devin raised his eyebrows and watched Rick walk back to the television playing the Cleveland Browns and Cincinnati Bengals game.

"I guess I'll see you at school tomorrow and then for trick or treating," Valerie smiled, making Devin feel gooey inside. "Oh! Eric will be hanging out with us. That's cool, right? I mean, you two are friends and hang out and stuff." Devin's warm squishing feeling began to harden as reality set in; Eric, his friend, was dating the girl of his dreams.

"Yeah. That's cool," Devin released a long sigh, letting all the air in his lungs release.

"Okay. I'll see ya," Valerie waved as she closed the door.

Devin waved back, walking from the front door, heading back to the car.

"Hey, Devin," Scott began to mock, "I, uh, was like, you know, wondering—about the thing tomorrow, if, like, you could be, ya know, be—a bigger dweeb?" Ryan laughed at Scott's impression of his brother until he took their foreheads and slammed them together. "Shut up, ass hats!"

Devin drove home, leaving Ryan and Scott to walk to the store. As they watched him drive away, Ryan realized he would have to walk back home from the store alone, as Scott lived near the main road where the market was. "Worth it," he smiled, looking for confirmation from Scott, his best friend. "Yeah, it was!" Scott agreed.

They performed their handshake, which consisted of the simple task of their hands sliding against one another. It wasn't original, but it worked for them. They walked on the side of the road, talking about anything and everything that came to mind.



# CHAPTER FOUR

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# TENDERNESS

The Loyal Oak Market loomed like a foreboding relic, an ancient barn renovated into a drive-thru convenience store casting long, ominous shadows on the desolate road. Years ago, Ryan dismissed it as a mere barn until his mother made a fateful stop for supplies. The era of Garbage Pail Kid cards had dawned, and the market became Ryan's shortcut to acquiring a pack effortlessly. The barn's interior harbored more than convenience; it concealed a plethora of beer, a secret haven for adult covert alcohol acquisitions. Fortunately, the local churches retained their congregations, sparing Ryan and Scott from the prying eyes of adults.

"Here." Ryan yanked on Scott's hood, drawing his attention. A five-dollar bill exchanged hands. "What's this for?"

Ryan grinned, divulging, "Convinced my brother to chauffeur me to your place so he could catch a glimpse of your sister." Scott stared at Ryan's unchanged expression. Concern crept into Ryan. "Did I upset you?"

"That is the most selfish thing, taking money from your vulnerable, desperate brother. I have never been—prouder of you than I am right now!" Laughter echoed as they entered the ominous barn store for their collectibles and snacks.

Years earlier, Jennifer Brayer, the neighborhood's go-to babysitter, presided over the Oak's register, watching two familiar figures stroll in. "Hey Jennifer!" they chorused. A smile graced Jennifer's face. "Hey Ryan!... Scott."

Scott had been a challenge for Jennifer during his younger days, a source of self-consciousness. With adorable curls framing her face, Jennifer couldn't escape Scott's early flirtations, which began in fifth grade when she was a Norton High senior. "Hey Jennifer," Scott purred, raising his eyebrows suggestively. Jennifer's subtle smile fueled Scott's belief she harbored interest.

"Did the new TMNT come in?" Ryan inquired. Jennifer regretfully shook her head. "No. Sorry, bud. It got delayed a couple of weeks. Sorry about that." Ryan's disappointment was palpable, but his spirits lifted at the sight of series fourteen Garbage Pail Kid card packages on the counter.



Calculating his purchase, he figured he could snag three packs and a Tootsie Roll Pop and still have enough.

As Ryan finalized his transaction, Jennifer fought to keep her curly black hair from obscuring her eyes. "How's your brother and sister?" she inquired. Unwrapping his sucker, Ryan replied, "Devin's still a pain, and Layla remains the sweet one until my parents stop looking; then, she's not sometimes." A shared laugh accompanied Jennifer's offer of a bag, which Ryan declined, anticipating potential trades with Scott.

Both approached the counter, placing two packs of cards and a sucker. Jennifer squinted at him, his attempt at seduction evident as he placed the sucker in his mouth, attempting what he considered "sexy eyes." "You like Tootsie Pops?" he queried. Jennifer released a shallow breath, uncertain of his intentions but ready to knock him down a peg or two. The transition to high school hadn't softened her resolve.

"I can get to the middle fast with not that many licks. Know what I mean?" Scott's crude remark hung in the air, leaving an awkward silence. Jennifer, fully aware of his insinuation, couldn't help but grimace. Offended, Scott scoffed at the idea she found him repulsive.

"Please. It would be a privilege, and you would love it," Scott insisted, prompting Jennifer to burst into laughter at the audacity of the eighth grader making advances. Unfazed, Scott mumbled, "Oh, blow me," as he began to walk away, visibly embarrassed.

Jennifer, not one to let such comments slide, snapped her fingers to get Scott's attention. As he turned back, expecting a different reaction, Jennifer pointed to her toothy smile. "You see this gap in between my teeth?" she teased. Ryan, curious about the commotion, walked over to join them. "If I were to blow you, there would still be room left over," she quipped.

Shocked, Scott stood with his mouth open while Ryan erupted into loud laughter, nearly falling to the ground with sides hurting. "Whatever," Scott scoffed as he walked from the entrance, and Ryan continued laughing all the way to Wadsworth Road, the supposedly "busy" street they had to cross to return to their housing development.

"What a bitch! She didn't have to be that mean. 'I'm still a kid,' Scott complained. Ryan, whose laughter began to slow, replied, "Talk like an adult, get treated like one." Scott shook his head as he opened his first pack of GPK cards. "Shut up, Ryan!"

Feeling a bit guilty about his prolonged laughter, Ryan began to open a pack of cards, carefully chewing on the hard stick of gum, hoping it wouldn't break his teeth. The conversation shifted as they discussed more mature topics influenced by Scott's dad, Rick, who had become more vocal about adult matters due to job loss.

"Can I ask you a question?" Ryan ventured. Scott, intrigued, raised his eyebrows, removing the sucker from his mouth. It was a departure from their usual conversations, and Ryan, navigating unfamiliar territory, sought answers about Scott's surprisingly advanced knowledge of *grown-up stuff*.

"My dad has these videos. He watches them when everyone is asleep but lets them play when he's passed out on the couch. I just sit at the top of the stairs and watch them through the bars from the rail," Scott explained. As they walked, Ryan looked down at his feet, contemplating Scott's home.

"Did he always do that?" Ryan asked. Scott sifted through his cards, searching for the Zipped Kip card with a boy featuring a zipper for a mouth and eyes, or its alternate, Jack Tracks. "Don't think so. Just when he lost his job."

"What about your mom?" Ryan suggested.

"What about her?" Scott winced.

"I mean, like, you know, she's around for stuff like that."

"Gross. Have you seen my mother lately?" Scott replied, shivering at the thought, offended Ryan would mention her in that context. "He drinks and gets angry a lot." Ryan nodded and had to ask one final question because he was Scott's friend. "He doesn't hit you or anyone, does he?"

"Nah. He yells a lot. Makes us out like we're the losers, that we're the dumb ones, and he's right all the time. My dad is harsh on my sister more than anyone. My mom stays quiet and doesn't talk much anymore. Not to anyone." Scott stopped talking, realizing how distressing it was to have a family as they are now. "Just don't tell anyone because it's kind of embarrassing."

Ryan nodded and reassured, "I won't tell anyone. I swear." Scott faked a smile and shook his head, knowing his best friend since third grade wouldn't spill his family's dirty laundry. Scott didn't think he was the only kid with a shaky home life. Many in the three communities had households with little money and depressed adults from manufacturing jobs ending. The decline began in the 1960s but would worsen as time went on. The people would have to endure the Rubber City's financial hardships for

many years. However, Ryan would never truly understand the difficulties of others until he became older. He was content where he was, even with death looming over him, a truth he would face even when no one else wanted to.

“You want to hang out in the woods and trade cards?” Scott wondered. As enticing as it was, Ryan felt guilty for not being at home with his mom. “No. I think I’m going to go home now,” he replied. Understanding the situation, Scott didn’t whine or plead with Ryan to hang out longer. Instead, Scott nodded and told him to take it easy as they parted ways at his driveway.

Ryan observed as Scott made his way through his garage to the side door, letting out a sigh. He knew he would have to journey home with nothing but his thoughts. Glancing at Scott’s house, he noticed Valerie peering out her bedroom window. Their eyes met, and Ryan couldn’t help but sense loneliness emanating from her.

Valerie offered a smile and waved at Ryan. It was an unexpected acknowledgment, and he pondered how to respond. *Should I give an enthusiastic wave back? Or perhaps a more subdued one?* Eventually, Ryan decided on a slow wave, infused with a hint of empathy, wanting her to feel reassured now that he understood the dynamics of life in the Donovan household. Valerie smiled back, gazing out the window as if anticipating someone to rescue her.

Ryan held onto a glimmer of hope someone would. *She deserves better.*

The temperature dropped substantially between when Ryan left his house and when he began walking home. Dark clouds took over the sky, and Ryan felt like he was the last person on Earth; houses appeared empty with no light emerging through the windows. No children played outside as they usually did on the weekends. For years, the neighborhood roads he had known seemed to become more vacant as people began to leave for better jobs. It was a lonely, desolate feeling walking through Holiday Heights as dismay and desperation came over it. It became lost in its unkemptness.

Ryan saw his home in the distance. His family lived in the last house on a dead-end street, so he wasn’t surprised when a car pulled into his driveway. He still became excited about the prospect of having a visitor. Still, the cars used it to turn around like usual because they didn’t realize the road had ended despite the road sign two hundred feet away saying so. Ryan looked ahead at the car reversing itself and gazed through its windows at the spruce tree in his yard. He still thought about the strange occurrences

over the last week. He couldn't help but wonder if there was something to the shadow appearing in the hallway traveling to his front yard, stopping at the tree.

As it drove off, the car revealed a man standing in front of the spruce—it's *him*. It was no longer a shadow. Ryan knew it was the same entity by its stature, short with hunched shoulders and a balding head. While remnants of dark mist outlined its body, it was still a man. The man's eyes were big, chest heaving, becoming angrier with Ryan's every second. The man's black polyester tracksuit remained still as the wind blew harder.

They stared at one another for a few moments, but it felt like minutes to Ryan. The phantom began to gasp for air as his body began to tear apart from the bottom of his chin down to his chest; four lines of blood began to pour down his body. Ryan put his hands up to his chin, ready to hide his face. He didn't want to look away, but the terror he witnessed from afar was too much. The dark spirit quickly put its arms out, pushing away whatever was attacking him, causing Ryan to fall backward. It's so far away but feels so close.

The man opened his mouth, yelling for help to save him. No noise came from the spirit with black surrounding him, flowing upward as pieces of dark separated, dissipating in the air above. The man's head bent backward as five holes appeared on his neck before an unseen force pulled out his throat. Ryan didn't understand what was happening—is *this how you died?* A wad of human flesh with parts of the larynx and vocal cord floated before it fell onto the grass. The short, balding man in the black tracksuit clutched his throat as blood spewed through his fingers. Ryan finally covered his eyes, waiting for it to disappear, wanting to never see the man again. As Ryan gently pulled his hands from over his eyes, the body in front of the spruce tree disappeared, and all that remained was the overcast sky, wind, and his house ahead. He breathed out slowly as his heart raced. He hoped this would be the last time, but he knew deep within it wouldn't be.

Shaken from the entity appearing more vivid than before, displaying its mutilation, Ryan walked through the front door to the sound of painful moans and retching. He had heard these sounds before, all too well as of late. Ryan looked up the stairs and saw Layla standing near her bedroom door, worried about the bathroom sounds. He put his hand out, indicating for her to stay put before running up the stairs and into the hallway

bathroom. Ryan found his mother with her head in the toilet while his brother held her hair back.

“We’ve been here for a while now,” Devin informed him, talking to him as a person and not just an older brother. Rebecca tapped on the side of the toilet, wanting to speak only to throw up more. After spitting out excess saliva, their mother added, “It won’t be long now. I had to eat something. Forced meh self to swallow some food.”

Ryan looked over to Devin, wanting to ask if she needed anything. Devin shrugged his shoulders, knowing what his little brother was thinking, not knowing what to say or what else he could do for her. Tired and full of fear, Rebecca sat up, looked at her two sons, and joked, “It’s a good day today, innit?” Her boys smiled, knowing their mother was trying to make light of her sickness, but neither wanted to laugh.

“Yeah, mom. It’s a lovely day,” Ryan answered. Rebecca gently nodded her head and stretched her arms out for each of her sons to grab, “Help your old mum to the bedroom then?” Ryan and Devin reached for their mother, helping raise her to her feet.

Turning their mother’s body towards the bathroom door, they looked up to find Layla worried about her mom. With tears already developing in her eyes, Layla whined, “Is mum going to be okay?” Rebecca found the energy to shuffle over to Layla, allowing her to hug her mother’s legs. Rebecca comforted Layla by leaning gently to put her hands on her daughter’s back. “Don’t you worry about me, dearie. Everyone has their good and not-so-good days. Today wasn’t so good, is all, but it doesn’t mean tomorrow won’t be better.”

Layla heard her mother and was comforted by her voice more than her words. She came across as naïve sometimes, but Layla knew her mother was not doing well despite what she said. All she could do was rely on her brother to be around and help when they could and hope her daddy would return home soon. “Go and hang out in your room, Layla, please,” Ryan asked his sister.

“But I’ve been in there all day with—,” Layla griped.

“Just do it, Layla! Pretty please with sugar on top! Go play in your room while we help mom!” Devin yelled. Layla stomped her foot in defiance and marched to her room, mumbling incoherent gripes.

The boys guided their mother to the main bedroom across from Ryan’s. Approaching her bed, Rebecca gently fell forwards and pulled her legs onto

the mattress. “I need a big spoon and a little spoon,” she requested. Ryan and Devin knew what she meant—they hadn’t played it in a while, but they knew what to do.

Ryan scooted beside his mom on the bed, back towards her, allowing Rebecca to cuddle her youngest boy. Devin followed suit and nuzzled his mom. All three rested on the bed and were emotionally exhausted. They had been for a while now. “That’s my good lads. You’re my good boys. I don’t care what anyone says about ya.” She meant it as a joke, but neither laughed. They relaxed next to their mom and began to nod off from the warmth of their bodies being close.

Layla continued to mumble, complaining people treated her like a kid, the typical child meltdown. Her room was dark, and the Lite Brite glow illuminated her bedroom as the white light from the bulb behind the black paper surrounded the sides. Layla worked with black refillable sheets for her toy as she had poked many holes in the ones that came with the set. It was her favorite toy because she loved how the different colored pegs lit up when driven through the designated holes to reveal a boat, a clown, and so on.

She fell to the floor, legs crossed in front of her toy, looking at the picture she had almost finished. “It’s not fair, ya know? I understand what’s going on. They don’t have to pretend with me,” she complained. Layla knew her mother had cancer but didn’t know what her mother had to go through with her illness. Layla’s tone might have been different if she had. She was more confused than angry.

As Layla released a long sigh, her demeanor changed. She became excited to continue her art with the multicolored pegs across her floor. “What color should I do next?”

A bloodied hand reached Layla’s right side, blue with torn, loose skin, pointing to the floor at the pegs. Layla watched its pointer finger wave around, searching with a bent nail. *That must feel bloody awful*, Layla thought with her mother's accent. She knew something terrible had happened to the person sitting behind her.

Layla didn’t look back. She wasn’t scared of it— she didn’t want to accidentally stare at the torn body, especially their face. *That would just be terribly rude*. She learned it wasn’t polite to stare the day she had become fixated on a girl with a physical deformity at a local mall while shopping with her mom. Rebecca stopped her, explaining why it wasn’t pleasant to

stare— *“It’s because they are self-conscious about it. It reminds them they’re different and don’t want to be. But it’s our differences that make us not like the rest, innit?”* Her mother always had a way of explaining things to her, and right now, the advice was good to remember.

The mutilated hand quickly made a fist, startling Layla. The sound of crunching, popping bones and joints made her shudder. Maybe her hands hurt, she thought, trying to make the best of what was happening. The hand began pointing again, finally making its choice of the clear peg.

“The clear one? Okay. We’ve used a lot of clear pegs and some blue. Where do you want this one to go?” The hand hovered next to her. As her body shifted its weight forward, more bones cracked, causing shivers throughout Layla’s body.

It pointed to another clear peg, creating a large oval on the attached lit board. Two blue rectangles were attached to the oval's bottom, and two orange triangles on top were made of even more pegs on the Lite Brite page. Layla knew what it would turn out like before she finished. She just wanted her new friend to have a little fun with it.

“It’s a very pretty kitty,” Layla smiled as she looked down below the lit pegs resembling a cat and read the words made of pink pegs spelling—  
SEE?





# CHAPTER FIVE

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# SAVE IT FOR LATER

Rolling Acres Mall lay quiet about an hour before security sealed its doors for the night. The rain dampened consumer traffic, dissuading people from various corners of Akron. With summertime a distant memory and the holidays not yet in full swing, the mall held an air of quiet anticipation. However, the work at hand remained, and Jerry Lawter, employed at the Musicland, had a choice to make. The boxes of merchandise awaited unpacking, processing, and placement on the store floor, but Jerry, in his characteristic manner, decided it could all wait until the next morning.

Procrastination was the teenage norm for many part-time employees, and Jerry was no exception. Convinced the boxes contained nothing more than copies of U2's *Rattle and Hum* and Jane's Addiction's *Nothing Shocking*, he deemed it unnecessary to open and shelve them immediately. Leaving a note for the morning opener seemed sufficient.

Managing the merchandising racks and showcasing new releases was a straightforward task due to the existing space. Cleaning supplies for the records and cheap headphones hung on the wall were left to gather dust in the backroom. In the world of Musicland, the mantra was clear – "We Got What's Hot."

Jerry performed the bare minimum duties, counting down the registers and recording the day's sales in the company provided book. He wouldn't stay beyond his scheduled closing time – after all, he had social plans, a gathering at a friend's house near Norton High. Vacuuming the floor or tidying up the records seemed unnecessary to Jerry. As a part-time retail manager, or, as he liked to think of himself, a "warm body," he was only scheduled when no one else could work or when full-time management took time off and needed someone to close – a shift nobody preferred.

Jerry's shift happened to overlap with the presence of a cute girl he had noticed working at Merry-Go-Round, often showcasing the trendy looks they advertised. He didn't know her name, but he wanted to. Assuming she was still in high school since she didn't usually work, Jerry, a freshman at the University of Akron, contemplated the age difference—*she might not be eighteen*. The race against time began as he hurriedly set the alarm, opened

the gate, and saw a group leaving Merry-Go-Round heading towards the parking lot. Inserting the key into the lock, he attempted to turn it, but both key and lock seemed unwilling to cooperate. In his typical fashion, he resorted to yanking and cursing instead of remembering the need to lift the gate to facilitate the key's turn. The race was on – could he lock the gate before they exited the building?

Jerry's hopes sank as the group exited the mall through the doors next to Gadzooks, making their way to the parking lot near the theater – the designated parking area for employees on the south side. *There went my chance*, he thought. The missed opportunity disappointed him, but Jerry had a party to attend, and a change of clothes awaited in the back seat of his yellow Aries K to facilitate a quick transformation. The rain starting the night before Halloween continued, and as he walked, Jerry noticed a few parking light lamps flickering, signaling the need for maintenance or a bulb change.

Passing under the yellow Rolling Acres Theater entrance sign adorned with bold red lettering, Jerry glanced at the backlit frames showcasing new movie posters. He enjoyed keeping up with upcoming releases, and through the glass, he caught sight of the Ghostbusters logo, featuring the iconic ghost holding two fingers, accompanied by a tagline reading, *Guess Who's Coming to Save the World Again?* Excitement surged through him at the prospect of a sequel to one of his favorite films. Eager to get a closer look, Jerry approached the box office, only to realize it had already shut down for the night, with the doors securely locked.

The parking lot held only a few cars at this late hour. Some belonged to mall employees, while others were likely owned by those watching the latest releases at the theater – perhaps the fourth Halloween film, bringing back Michael Myers. The night held the anticipation of cinema, whether it was "Night of the Demons," "Alien Nation," or "Mystic Pizza."

The trees and bushes beside the theater wobbled as Jerry walked by, casting eerie shadows in the dim light. Slowing his brisk pace, Jerry turned his head towards the plants, their leaves now tinged with autumn red, and the pine tree to his right. A sudden rustle, high pitched and frenetic, echoed from the foliage. A squirrel darted out, its erratic movements causing Jerry to step back and take a deep breath, embarrassed at being startled by a woodland creature.

Against the backdrop of rustling leaves and pine needles, something caught Jerry's attention. He peered between the branches, squinting into the darkness where the twigs ended and something else began. A sense of unease crept over him. Jerry gasped, realizing something was near him, though it wasn't moving anymore. Grey skin shifted as it breathed, revealing scars on its frail and injured body. Concerned for the creature, Jerry began to extend his arm, intending to offer help.

"You don't have to be afraid of me. I'm not goin' to—" Jerry started, but his words trailed off as the branches shifted, unveiling large piercing yellow eyes. A chill ran down his spine. It was a wolf, but not like any wolf Jerry had ever seen.

"Jesus!" he yelled involuntarily.

The wolf, its teeth bared and a low growl emanating from its throat, signaled a clear warning. Saliva dripped from its snout, and Jerry felt a sudden surge of fear, his right arm still outstretched in a futile attempt to defend himself.

It turned its massive body towards Jerry, and without hesitation, it opened its mouth wide, clamping down around Jerry's arm near his shoulder. A short shriek escaped Jerry's lips before the wolf, in one swift jerk of its unwieldy head, tore his arm off. Blood poured onto the sidewalk from Jerry's mangled shoulder, the gaping wound—a horrifying testament to the unexpected brutality unfolded.

Jerry stumbled onto his feet, panic setting in as the wolf emerged from the shadows and bushes, now fully visible in the dimly lit parking lot. Desperation fueled his thoughts—there had to be a way to escape. There must be more doors, more exits. Using his remaining hand to cover the bloody stump of his missing arm, Jerry shuffled around the bushes, moving hastily up the sidewalk leading to the theater's side. The wolf, chewing on its hind legs as it walked, ominously followed in pursuit.

As Jerry reached the corner, he spotted an exit door meant for the late-night movie audience to access the parking lot. With his bloody left hand, he repeatedly pulled on the handle, the slippery grip causing increased fear and frustration. Gasping for breath, he pressed his face against the cold window, realizing the only way to release the lock was the push bar on the opposite side. In desperation, Jerry slammed his bloody hand against the glass, hoping to attract the attention of anyone nearby.

“Please! Somebody help me!” Jerry's desperate pleas echoed through the glass door as he continued to pull on the handle with no one on the other side to assist. Wiping the mucus from his nose onto his black Members Only jacket, he choked back frightened gasps. “Please,” he weakly begged for any patrons or employees within earshot, defeated, slowly collapsing to his knees. His blood-soaked hand left a smeared handprint down the glass door as he put his head between his knees, holding his hand against the torn wound, blood spewing onto the grass and concrete. Jerry was losing blood rapidly, the wolf trailing behind him ensuring a gruesome end unless help arrived soon.

The werewolf's panting drew Jerry's fading attention. Lifting his head with half opened eyes, he spotted the giant wolf emerging from the left on all fours, deliberately staying within Jerry's line of sight. The creature appeared to relish the impending kill, savoring the anticipation rather than opting for a swift demise. It swaggered toward Jerry's near lifeless body, emitting a low growl. Jerry observed the patches of missing hair on the wolf's disfigured body, from its head down to its human-like paws and back feet. “Come on,” Jerry slurred, “Finish me off, you ugly piece of shit. Get it over with!”

The mongrel lowered its head, getting close to Jerry's face, their foreheads almost touching. Jerry, avoiding direct eye contact with the imminent threat, felt the creature's warm breath against his ears. A repugnant odor lingered in the air, a mix of warmth and the foul remnants of decaying flesh trapped between the creature's teeth. The wolf inhaled deeply, capturing the scent of Jerry's blood and sweat. It opened its mouth and clamped onto him, chewing through the crotch of Jerry's jeans, violently tossing his upper torso as more blood spilled onto the sidewalk and nearby bushes.

With brutal force, the wolf slammed Jerry's head onto the pavement, crushing the back of his skull. It tore off Jerry's genitals, leaving them blood soaked and dangling from the fresh hole in his pants. The wolf slowly opened its mouth, allowing the lifeless corpse to slide out, leaving a gruesome scene in its wake.

*Why do we kill when we aren't even hungry? Isn't it a waste?* The remnants of humanity within the beast were weary. Battling the primal creature who usurped control under the full moon, he had struggled for dominance.

*You take mankind and their resourcefulness for granted, which is why our body is scarred,” the monster began:*

*You tear off an arm; they have another.*

*You slice one side of the face. Tear away the other. As long as they move, they can kill.*

*You must finish.*

*You are animal now.*

*I just don’t want it anymore.*

*You do not get to make that decision. The animal inside and out is more powerful than your human will to fight it. Why do so?*

*You will let go and allow me to take over or be driven mad. You are nothing without me, small and fearful with an aging body, tired by the mere thought of leaving your home.*

*You know I’m right.*

*You think, and I listen. All the days I have not taken over your body and mind, you think of your worthlessness.*

*You will allow me to take over both parts of you.*

The human voice began to talk low and slow, claiming defeat after fighting against his heightened animal instincts. *I can’t do it anymore. It’s too hard. I had nothing, but at least I feel better when I’m not hunting with you.*

*It will not matter. You will let me take over when I can. You will make peace with us, existing. We will live the way you always wanted to, and in exchange, I will hunt.*

*It’s like dealing with the devil.*

*No. You have to agree to the devil’s terms. You did not have a choice. Your gift was given to you without consent. The devil wishes they could do what I do, what others like us do.*

The voice of the man and the beast harmonized into a singular entity. One possessed reason and consciousness, while the other embodied the primal, untamed instinct residing within us all. The beast, a manifestation of the dormant primal nature, occasionally unleashed. The curse, or perhaps a twisted gift, provided a warped rationale for the havoc it wreaked, shrouding the carrier in anonymity—a cloak for the evaporation of human compassion.

The final showing of the latest Halloween film concluded around a quarter past eleven. Exiting theater goers engaged in casual post movie

discussions, oblivious to the smeared blood adorning the lower half of the glass door. As the first couple approached the exit, eager to push the bar and open the metal door, they encountered an unexpected obstruction. Determinedly, a burly man named Jake, who had attended the film with his girlfriend, exerted all his strength to force the door open. Unbeknownst to him, the obstacle was Jerry Lawter's mangled body. The door swung open, causing Jake to stumble and fall onto the sidewalk, directly onto Jerry's mutilated remains, his face smeared with blood and crushed testicles. Amidst the collective screams from those witnessing the gruesome scene, Jake's horrified reactions echoed the loudest as he desperately attempted to wipe away the macabre remnants of Jerry Lawter.





# CHAPTER SIX

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# THIS IS THE DAY

The news of animal maulings broke on the radio and local news around six o'clock on Halloween morning. The media outlets began drawing comparisons between the recent deaths over the last two days and those from the previous months. Local authorities provided scant and speculative details, characteristic of Akron and Canton in the late '80s. Homemakers across the three pillow towns—Norton, Barberton, and Wadsworth—interrupted their daily routines to call their husbands at work, discussing the imperative decision of whether their children should go out for trick-or-treating. Worry filled wives sought reassurance, while indifferent husbands mostly shrugged, except for Rebecca Hatcher, who dismissed such concerns until more concrete details emerged. *I have more pressing matters at hand right now. Thank you very much*, she thought, continuing with her day while residents flooded local radio stations to voice their opinions on delaying Halloween.

Heated remarks from both sides of the argument echoed loudly and were unmistakably clear. Some argued the odds of animal attacks in the state and county were low, drawing parallels to the situation in *Jaws* when the mayor kept the beach open during a holiday—with disastrous consequences. Everyone had a valid point, but ultimately, the decision rested with the towns.

In a house with three kids, bathroom time was always a challenge. As the more passive one among the siblings, Ryan opted for his showers at night, mainly because coaxing Devin out of the bathroom was a chore. Despite claiming not to care about his appearance, Devin, with his dark hair falling near his chin, spent close to an hour in the bathroom, meticulously grooming himself with the help of Dep hair gel. Layla, on the other hand, had no patience for such vanity. Even though she took her showers at night, she insisted on having her long brown hair looking nice—cue their mom to save the day.

"Devin, get out of the bathroom and let your sister have a turn!" Rebecca pounded on the door, wielding a spatula. Devin huffed, struggling to make the cowlick on the back of his head cooperate. "I'm almost done,

Ma! Hair is not agreeing with me," he grumbled, inheriting this hereditary trait from his father's side. According to family lore, what didn't work for Devin worked for Layla, whose curls made her perfectly content with herself, not succumbing to the excessive use of hairspray common among older girls.

"You're fine. You're beautiful like your mother, practically an Adonis. Now get out and let your sister have a go!" Rebecca ordered with a touch of sarcasm.

Meanwhile, Ryan was ready to go. Having already brushed his hair earlier while his brother hit the snooze button on the alarm, he emerged from his bedroom and followed his mother, who had just finished scolding Devin, through the bathroom door and back towards the kitchen.

Their mother seemed to be doing well, considering her diagnosis months prior. However, being the person he was, Ryan couldn't shake the feeling of guilt for leaving his mother at home. *What if she needed something? What if she fell? What if she stopped breathing?* These were the worries of a fourteen-year-old with concerns extending beyond the typical teenage realm.

"I just made scrambled eggs this mornin.' Was there something else you want?" Rebecca asked Ryan as he followed behind her. "Um," he began, not wanting to be a nuisance, "could you maybe put cheese on them? You know, the cheesy eggs." Rebecca looked at her son, who was almost the same height as her, and grinned. She knew he wanted something more but didn't want to be a burden. "Some shredded cheese on the eggs it shall be, good sir."

Devin walked into the kitchen as Ryan sat down for his breakfast. "How the hell do you get ready so fast?" Devin asked Ryan. Rebecca was annoyed Devin used "hell" in a sentence, but she figured it was better than dropping the f-bomb. Ryan gleamed, putting his hands under his face, and replied, "It's just hard to fix what's already perfect." Devin scoffed, annoyed at the conceitedness, yet impressed his little brother had become more outspoken. "Whatever, dorkus."

"Are you going to have some eggs this morning?" Rebecca wondered as she noticed Devin putting his bookbag strap over his shoulder. "Not hungry. I'm going to wait for Eric to give me a ride to school." Disappointed by his lack of hunger, Rebecca was annoyed her son hung with the troglodyte, Eric Flanagan. I would give anything to have an appetite again, she thought.

Their mother was wasting away. When the disease started, she was five foot six, weighing one hundred fifty pounds, and now she was ninety pounds. Her arms and legs had lost their mass, causing her to appear anorexic. She didn't leave the house much, so no one would know how her cancer affected her.

"Your father is going to be here tonight as part of the lookout for the neighborhood. It would help if you were civil with him," Rebecca announced, pointing to Devin. With a strawberry Pop-Tart hanging out of his mouth after claiming he wasn't hungry, Devin responded, "Okay, mom. I'll get right on that," having no intention of doing so.

"I mean it!" his mother responded. Devin rolled his eyes, and as he slipped through the glass door leading to the deck, he replied, "So do I. Don't expect much because I don't plan on being around him anyway."

"He's the only father you're going to have, ya know. Best be civil with him," Rebecca pointed out. Devin poked his head, looked at his mother's pale face, and replied, "Lucky me. I guess I picked the short straw, didn't I?" Opening her mouth to speak, Rebecca realized her son had already made his way down the deck's stairs towards the driveway. Her rebuttal would have been pointless, as Devin would have the last words this time.

"Mother?" a tiny English voice said, "Why doesn't Devin like daddy?" Rebecca turned to find her little LayLoo waiting at the table with her brother. Realizing the eggs were done, Rebecca began shuffling through the cabinets to find a couple of paper plates. "I think your brother is a little disappointed with your father. He probably just doesn't like that he left," she explained while serving scrambled eggs.

Confused, Ryan pointed out, "But you're the one who wanted him gone for a bit, right?" Their mother immediately rebutted, "It's complicated, okay? Just hurry and eat your eggs. If you're quick about it, you might get a ride to the bus stop."

This didn't do anything for Ryan because he wouldn't get to talk to Christina White, also known as Christy, his other best friend who lived down the street and could be a bit clingy. He enjoyed being Christina's friend overall and hanging out with her, but sometimes she could be a little overwhelming. If they were Peanuts characters, he would be Linus with the blue blanket over his head. Christina would be Sally, Charlie Brown's sister, who would gush whenever he was around, saying, *Isn't he the cutest thing!* That's where Ryan's head went—movies and television.

“I don’t want to do that!” Layla yelled with concern. “If we do, we won’t talk to Christina as much.” Rebecca smiled at her little girl, knowing what Ryan would say next. “Oh...yeah. That would be a real bummer,” Ryan fired back like the sarcasm slinger he was becoming, pretending he didn’t have feelings towards Christina. Then he began to feel bad because LayLoo liked her, and he didn’t want her to be sad because he felt the need to be an asshole for a moment.

Layla was in fifth grade and fully capable of walking to the bus stop herself. Still, Ryan had this sense of duty and obligation to ensure she wasn’t alone since they rode the same bus. One bus picked up for Norton Primary, Intermediate, and Middle School. He had to overcome his overprotectiveness because she wouldn’t be with him once he made it to high school the following year. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have to ride the bus if his brother got a car soon.

It was time for the siblings to leave for school. With trepidation, Ryan gathered his backpack with the basics—books, paper, pencils, erasers, and a duplicate Garbage Pail Kids card from his collection to trade with Scott on the bus. You know, *the essentials*. As they left the kitchen to walk down a flight of stairs to the front door, Ryan looked back at his mom. Knowing her son’s concern, Rebecca smiled and waved her slender hand. Ryan returned the gesture and lightly pushed Layla in front of him, telling her to hurry. Layla squatted down to ensure her Barbie doll was in her backpack, and to no surprise, it was.

Rebecca pulled out a seat at the kitchen table and sighed. She was alone in the house again, and to some stay-at-home mothers, it was a great thing, but for Rebecca, it was lonely, knowing her time would be up before she knew it. She looked over at the piled-up mail and thumbed through all the junk. Usually, it was a local paper or coupons, but a shiny envelope with the word Mastercard intrigued her the most.

Ryan and Layla walked onto the street and Devin climbed into Eric Flanagan’s ’83 Pontiac Fiero's passenger seat. Ryan raced towards the car, wanting to talk to his brother about their mother. Eric was the first to notice Ryan approaching the car before Devin looked over and rolled his eyes, annoyed his brother would even ask. “Got a sec?” Eric poked his head out of his window and looked Ryan up and down, ignoring Layla, who started off, looking at the tree behind them. “You wantin’ a ride?” Devin assumed.

Eric Flanagan was the neighborhood troublemaker, and everyone knew it, even if they could never prove it. Toilet papering houses, egging, bashing in mailboxes were his forte. He ventured out of the subdivision to vandalize one of his fellow jock classmate's cars. He took maple syrup and spread it around the car, putting aluminum foil over it, which created an adhesive. Hence, when the jock saw his vehicle the following day, he pulled the aluminum and tore the paint job right off—the epitome of what bullies look like—red hair, a pale face with freckles, and beady eyes. If Malachai from *Children of the Corn* and the bully from *A Christmas Story* conceived a child, Eric would be the result. Ryan always thought he could be the antichrist with an extreme overbite. *This guy can eat an apple through a chained fence.*

“Well, see, I would,” Eric began with a shit-eating grin, “but it turns out I don’t want to. See, I don’t tote around dorky little trout sniffers in my ride.” Ryan grinned and took in the insults with stride, knowing the conversation's verbal outcome before it began. More choice words came from Eric's mouth as his older brother just sat back and listened.

Devin wanted a friend in Eric because he was a good guy when they hung out alone. Still, when he was verbally and mentally abusive to others, he wondered what Valerie, the only girl he ever adored, saw in him. The only logical answer he could come up with was she never saw that side of him, or he was nice enough to her, giving her a reason not to stay home, which was a mess right now.

He couldn't tell you what had gotten into him at the time, but with little effort, Ryan mustered up the courage to fire back at Eric Flanagan. Something inside him told him just to *try it*.

“Calm down there, slick. You have a hoopty-ass Fiero, not a new Acura, which you couldn't even afford anyway. But suppose one day you manage to save enough money from whatever convenience stores you decide to knock off like the dime store hood you are. You might want to think about some dental work because that mouth, I mean, damn! Whenever you talk, I think of donkey sounds coming from it, being that you are an ass and all.” *That just happened?*

Devin looked down, closed his eyes, and whispered, “Oh, shit.” He knew what Eric's reaction would be, and it wasn't going to be good for his little brother.

“You’re dead, you little queer,” Eric said in a deep, low voice, so angry his upper lip wrapped under his teeth as he frowned. “Tonight. When everyone is getting their candy, you will get what’s coming to you.”

“Isn’t that the same schtick you usually use? Does it really work? May need to get some new material there, buddy.” Ryan couldn’t stop. His voice’s floodgates had rapidly opened, and it all came pouring out towards the one person who would crush his dick into nothingness.

“Just wait,” Eric threatened as he pointed toward Ryan. The Fiero revved, and Ryan yelled, “I’ll just be here waiting, not giving a crap.” Devin looked over to his brother as the car pulled away and mouthed, “What the hell is wrong with you?” Ryan shrugged his shoulders and mouthed, “I don’t know!”

The Fiero sputtered away. Ryan breathed in and shivered as he released the air from his lungs. He feared what he had gotten into, but now was not the time to ponder as he and Layla began walking to the bus stop. Ryan turned around and saw his sister watching the spruce in their front yard. It was the same tree where Ryan saw a wounded man in running attire. Layla placed her hands out in front of her. He had seen the motion before, yesterday, in fact.

“LayLoo, what are you doing?” he yelled, snapping her back to reality. Unsure why her arms were extended, Layla looked at her brother and pointed to the tree. She began to speak but stopped when she looked back to find nothing was in front of her—not anymore. “Nothing,” she replied, confused as she walked toward Ryan.

“Did you see something?” he asked. Not knowing Ryan saw something familiar a day earlier, Layla lied. “It was nothing. I thought I saw something in the woods.” They began walking, feeling awkward around one another until they met up with Christy at the corner of Greengate Drive and Jean Lane.

Christina waited patiently for her soon-to-be boyfriend and his little sister. *He’ll come around soon. I know it*, she thought as she watched them walking to her. She wore a stylish grey coat with a white scarf nearly matching her platinum blonde hair. Decked out in black jeans and a red and grey plaid vest underneath—all from Contempo Casuals. She matched it with a wide-brimmed, felt bowler hat resembling Debbie Gibson’s to finish the ensemble.

“Hi, Ryan!” she smiled, watching Ryan walk up the road with his hands in his jean jacket pockets. Ryan waved back, “Hey, Christie.” Layla looked at her shy brother and noticed his uneasiness, giggling. “Quiet you,” he jokingly told her. Layla pinched one side of her lips and moved her fingers to the other to show she wouldn’t say a word about his feelings.

“Hey, Christina?” Layla greeted as she skipped ahead and took her by the hand. “Have you seen a cat around here lately?” Befuddled, Christina looked back at Ryan, smiled, and answered her question the best she could. “I’ve seen lots of cats. They pop out of the woods sometimes. What does it look like?”

“It’s a girl, and I’m pretty sure it’s white. At least that’s how my friend describes her to me.”

“Layla,” Ryan uttered, annoyed at his sister's stories, “What friend? You barely talk to any of the people in your class.”

“I have friends!” Layla corrected Ryan. “Just because you don’t see them doesn’t mean they’re not there!”

Ryan raised his hands towards the sky, surrendering to Layla’s cute ten-year-old awe-inspiring rage. Christina widened her eyes at Ryan, gesturing he got in trouble with his little sister. Ryan snickered and let Christina listen to Layla once again.

“Well, is there anything that’ll help me keep an eye out?” Christina wondered, playing along. Layla shook her head for a moment until the lightbulb inside went off. “Oh! Yes! She may have color on her legs like she’s wearing boots.” Christina nodded, agreeing, “If I ever see a lost kitty cat, I will let you or your brother know.”

“Okay, but make sure it’s Ryan and not Devin. He’s been a little bit of a turd,” Layla explained. Both Ryan and Christina let their mouths drop. They were taken aback by Layla —she had never said anything of the sort before.

“LayLoo!” Ryan laughed.

“What? It's what mom says all the time. It's not news or anything. Besides, you know you feel the same way.” Ryan wasn’t one to disagree, but he needed to be the mature one. “Yeah, well, just because you can say something doesn’t mean you should sometimes.” Layla nodded her head in response. He wasn’t sure if she agreed because she wanted him to be quiet or if she took it to heart. *Maybe I should just throw her a bone—* “To be fair, though, he hasn’t been himself for a while now, huh?” Layla shrugged



her shoulders, reluctant to agree. Children rarely desire change; her family was not the same anymore and probably never will be.

Christina looked over at Ryan like he was the best person she had ever known. Unsure of how to comfort his sister about everything happening at home. "He'll be back to his old self, and maybe even better," he assured Layla as he put his arm around her. Layla nodded and skipped ahead of them, humming a children's song he had never heard before.

"She's a sweet kid," Christina whispered to Ryan. Her breath near his ear made his skin tingle, raising the hairs on his arms.

"Yeah, well, just wait a few years, and let's see how we feel about her then," he jested, knowing puberty would be a thing sooner than later.

They turned the corner on Claire Avenue to reach their bus stop, not saying a word to one another. Christina knew Ryan's looks he got on his face most time. She knew when he was content, happy, sad, and irritated. Ryan's face at the moment, *that look*, it was something else.

"Hey," Christina elbowed Ryan, keeping her hands in her pockets, "What's up with you?" Ryan looked down and away. Avoiding eye contact was what Ryan did when he was unsure how to answer or did not want to answer at all. She elbowed him again and smiled. He looked at her, down at the concrete, then back to Christina. There was something about her in the fall with her hat and outfit. Sometimes, she would blend into the scenery with light colored hair, fair skin, and a pink hue.

"Nothing. It's just..." Ryan threw his hand in the air, frustrated, unsure of putting what he had been experiencing into words. "What?" Christina asked as she put her arm through his to get closer.

"What? What is it?"

Ryan blew puffs of air as he thought about how to word his response. "Have you, ya know, seen anything weird lately?"

"Like what?"

He shook his head, afraid what he would say would sound insane, and thought it would be told to others, spreading through school like a plague. He didn't want to think of Christina like that, but it's difficult to expect the best when worse always comes around. Christina tugged on his arm to get him to spill the beans. "You know we've been through a lot together, you know," Christina said, attempting to make him feel at ease. "You have been there since I moved in with my grandparents. You played Barbies with me

when my parents didn't show up some weekends, not that I wanted them to," she smiled.

Ryan never asked why Christina moved in with her grandparents; he never considered bringing it up. He was always afraid of conflict and never wanted Christina to feel self-conscious or angry about her home life or lack thereof. "You don't have to worry about me. I promise," she ended.

He stared at Christina and explained, "I have been seeing these shadows lately—images of people. About a week ago, I saw something in the street looking at my house and bedroom window. I thought it was a man, and then it went away. A couple of nights ago, this shadow showed up at the end of the hall. Then it moved to the top of the stairs where LayLoo's room is and stopped only to move downstairs and back outside in front of the spruce tree in my front yard. Yesterday the shadow, I think, revealed itself more, a man. Someone who may have died from his throat being cut open? I don't know."

Unbeknownst to him, Layla was listening to the conversation. She was a good ten feet ahead of them, but she could hear like a bat, and her brother's conversation became too intriguing for her to ignore.

"To make it even weirder, I think I saw someone in her bedroom," Ryan continued, pointing to Layla with his thumb. "It may have been nothing. It might have been just the sides of my eyes playing tricks on me." Layla breathed deeply, relieved even, knowing her brother saw her new friend who hung out in her room.

There was a long silence before they all reached the bus stop. Layla wasn't sure if she should say anything to her brother. Christina was too busy trying to find the right words to say. And Ryan, well, he was just embarrassed he even brought it up.

"I think that you have a lot on your plate. It's a lot for anyone to deal with—someone with two siblings, a dad who's not around much, and a sick mother. It's not fair for someone to feel the need to be the strong one, taking on a burden you never wanted," Christina explained. Ryan began to wonder if the sentiment from Christina came from her own experience with her parents. He wanted to ask, maybe relate, but now was not when the bus arrived to pick them up.

Ryan looked around before the bus came to a halt and asked, "Where's Scott?" His friend, who usually met them halfway to the bus stop, seemed to be absent.

Eric and Devin arrived at the Donovan's house to pick up Valerie on the way to school. She usually waited for him in the driveway, but today the routine seemed to have changed; she wasn't there. It wasn't the first time Eric had to wait, probably not the last. Usually, revving the car's engine alerted her to come out, but she didn't hurry out of the house today.

"I'll go knock on the door," Devin volunteered, and for him, it was a pleasure. Valerie cracked the door, revealing the right side of her face. "You comin' today?" Devin asked. She shook her head, showing the other side of her head. Devin saw a discoloration near her eye and quickly put his hand on the side of the front door.

"No one is feeling good. We're just going to stay at home today," she whispered. Devin lightly pushed the door open. He needed to acknowledge what he thought he had seen. "I'll feel better tomorrow," she said as she fought to close it, but Devin won the struggle. "Devin! Let me close the door!" Finally, the door opened enough to view her face's purple and blue welt. Valerie looked down, embarrassed. Devin looked up in the air, holding his tongue and rage. He knew Rick, her father, had done this.

"Please don't say anything to anyone about this, please?" she pleaded with Devin. "He's never done this sort of thing before. He's just not himself, not like he used to be. Not since he was laid off from the tire factory." Devin laid his hands flat on his head and nodded to quell her fear of spreading rumors.

He wanted to say, *many people have lost their jobs around here, but it doesn't make it an excuse to hit your kids!* Devin wondered if Scott was all right. "Please," she reiterated. Devin looked away and nodded his head, "Fine," before walking away. It was the first time Devin walked away angry from Valerie, not at her, but at the conflicting thoughts going through his mind. If Devin told anyone, he would face the possibility Valerie would never speak to him again. Ideally, justice would come in and save the day if he did. Devin decided to honor Valerie's wishes and remained quiet, at least for a while. He told himself he would have to say something if it happened again. A rage in him wanted him to bust the door down and beat *that fat piece of shit to death*.

Devin slid back into the passenger seat of the Fiero. Eric looked at him, waiting for him to speak. "She's not feeling well today. Said she should be good tomorrow," he explained. Eric nodded his head, skeptical of what Devin was telling him.

“You sure Val’s all right?” Eric asked, seeking confirmation.

“Totally,” Devin lied, “You should call her later.”

Eric remained unconvinced by Devin’s answers. He had observed the front door open from the car and his friend’s reaction moments ago. Eric had seen the signs before; the reactions others have when they witness abuse in a household. He knew these things because he lived with intermittent abuse. Hell, he still does.

“Whatever you say, man,” Eric sighed as he pulled out of the driveway, thinking, “It may be one time, but it rarely stays that way. I don’t want that to happen to anyone.” Shaking his head to move his red hair from the front of his face, Eric rolled the windows down, blasted Def Leppard, and sped to school to quell his anger.

Two boys becoming men, born and raised on opposite sides of the proverbial tracks, both in love with the same girl, sharing anger over their love’s abuse, unable to be the hero without consequences. But Valerie didn’t want a hero; she needed understanding. Something she wasn’t receiving from anyone.



# CHAPTER SEVEN

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# MONEY FOR NOTHING

Rebecca emerged from her home's front door with an envelope, excited to walk across the yard with no socks. After stepping into the yard, she found the grass was too frigid for the loose skin on the bottoms of her feet so early. She was excited to place her letter in the box. It was the first time she felt happy in many months because she knew what the envelope could do for her and her kids, but the secret would remain with her, at least for now.

Melvin Craggs was placing new fishing line spools onto several of his rods when he spotted a frail Rebecca prancing across the grass to her mailbox. He was never concerned about other people's problems, but Melvin liked Rebecca the best of all the neighbors. She was polite when everyone else stayed away because of his reputation of being crabby and mean. But Melvin brought it on himself over the years. He watched Rebecca go from being a full-figured woman to being concerningly thin. She drowned in her drooping tops now, exposing her bony chest and ribs under spotted delicate skin with a swollen neck and belly.

It broke his heart no one knew he had—one he'd forgotten about. Rebecca met Melvin's eyes and waved to him while walking back. Melvin turned around and waved back, inviting her to visit with the flip of his hand and wrist towards himself, a rare occurrence. He moved out of his garage and looked around to see if anyone was around.

"Don't worry. He's not here yet," Rebecca reassured, referring to her husband. Melvin gave a quick grin and backed into the garage, his haven. "What you up to?" Rebecca asked with a smile.

From Maine, Melvin had a thick New England accent where his words tended to run together. However, with Rebecca being from the United Kingdom, she was used to thick accents resembling cockney.

"Whadda you up to den?" Melvin asked as Rebecca looked at his garage walls, decorated with pegboards holding tools and oversized items like a shovel, a rake, and a hoe. Melvin parked his Ford on the driveway, leaving space to open up his workspace, with only a small vehicle covered under a tarp. "What all this then," Rebecca pointed to the covered object, intrigued.

Melvin tipped his orange Syracuse football team hat and wiped his hands on his overalls. "Motorcycle! Ya may know it, bein' from over da way der." Rebecca walked over and grabbed the tarp, looking back for permission. "Go on 'den. Take it off."

Rebecca swiftly uncovered the motorcycle, revealing a black AJS. In awe, she walked around it, checking to make sure it was real. "It's an AJS?" she asked, already knowing the answer as she stared at the gold emblem on the side.

"Ah, yea," Melvin confirmed, "'53 Model 20 500."

"How'd you get a bike made in Britain here?" she asked.

"Had a buddy that lived der before he became a citizen. Fought in Japan, me and him. He didn't make it, doh. War didn't kill 'em; the cancer did."

"Seems to be an awful lot of that goin' on," Rebecca sighed. Melvin looked up, embarrassed he just said something thoughtless to a woman dying from it. "Is there anything wrong with it?" she wondered.

"Nah. I keep it up outta habit. Just too damn old now, lost the desire to ride, I s'pose."

"Would you sell it?"

Melvin looked up at Rebecca with curiosity as she examined the vehicle. "Not yet. Don't think I'm ready to part ways yet." Rebecca buried her lips over her teeth and nodded in disappointment.

"How does it ride?" she asked, moving past her disappointment.

"Well, it's got 20 HP at 6800 RPMs," he replied.

Rebecca nodded, "Right...So that you know, I have no idea what you just said."

Melvin chuckled and provided a better frame of reference, "It gets up to eighty-five miles per hour, so you won't be doing any real high speeds like bikes deese days." Rebecca nodded again, admiring the bike, taking her back to a place she called home, England.

After an awkward silence, Melvin leaned into his workbench and asked, "How ya been feelin'?" Rebecca was surprised he had taken an interest in her health and answered, "It's hard to eat and drink because me throat is swollen. Even if I could, don't have an appetite anyway."

He felt awkward asking, but Melvin knew Calvin hadn't lived in their house for weeks. As much as he despised Cal, he knew it was probably time



for him to come home soon and thought Rebecca felt the same way whether she wanted to admit it or not.

“Husband goin’ to come home?” he asked. Rebecca turned her back to look at all the tools on his garage wall near the bike and sighed. “Probably. Kids need their dad around now. It’s probably about time.”

“What the word you Brits like to use? Wanker? Twat?... He’s a bit of a wanker?” Melvin insinuated. Unsurprised by his comment, Rebecca turned, smiled, and replied, “He is sometimes, yeah. But he’s my wanker, ain’t he? But he’s the only wanker I got, so.”

When Rebecca kicked her husband out of her home, it wasn’t because of infidelity, looks, or arguments over money. He had become a different person, refusing to lay off the alcohol. Something happened—something she never thought Calvin would, or could, ever do. Rebecca could only hope he had learned from his mistake to be the father he needed to be for their children.

“How’s da kids den?” he asked, changing the subject.

“The girl is adorable. The girliest girl I have ever seen. The middle one is beginning to grow a backbone I don’t care for, not one bit. Still, good for ‘em. He’s still very considerate and sweet, probably to a fault, I think. The oldest lad, well, he’s like me.”

Melvin grabbed a wrench from the bench, tapping it on his palm. “He can’t be that bad. Otha’ than hanging ‘round the hooligan, he seems like he’s okay.”

“He’s moody, stubborn, like his ‘ol ma, always thinkin’ he has something to prove. S’pose he’s like his father in dat way. Always talkin’ ‘bout doin’ things, just never does ‘em. It’s no wonder he doesn’t like his dad,” Rebecca said aloud, voicing thoughts keeping her up at night with no one in her bed to speak with about them.

Sucking his teeth, Melvin thought about the options he could offer to help his neighbor. “Boy sounds bored. Can’t blame ‘em. He lives in this little place with little to do ‘round here. When young boys figure it out, usually gets ‘em in trouble because nuthin else is excitin’,” he explained, remembering his childhood. “Idle hands and whatnot.” Feeling fatigued, Rebecca nodded and began to walk away back to her house.

“Tell da boy to come here den when he ain’t got nothin’ to do. Got things needed doing in the house and in da back. Maybe help clean the pool before I cover it for the season, get that husband of yours off my back. Ain’t

dat funny? We yelled at each other 'bout dat inconvenience filled with chlorine back der, and I get his son to do it instead!" Melvin mused with a deep, throaty laugh.

Rebecca laughed, not so much at what he said but that Melvin Craggs, the cranky neighbor, had a sense of humor. "That's terrible!" she laughed, choking on her words, gasping for air. "He'll do it. I'll call when he's goin' to come by."

"A'ight then," he agreed.

The pleasant chuckle left her feeling a bit vulnerable—something that hadn't occurred in a while, she mused as she stepped back into the chilly air to make her way home. Just before leaving Melvin's driveway, she pivoted towards him and inquired, "What compensation are you planning to offer him? Devin will certainly be curious."

Lighting a Marlboro, Melvin yelled, "He helps me get things done before Thanksgiving, and he will get what's coming to him. Dat and my pleasant company." Unsure of what his intentions were, Rebecca questioned his motives. "Why Thanksgiving?"

"Boy needs a deadline. Don't want my place looking like white trash lives here anymore anyway," he answered. Rebecca knew not to step in Melvin's bullshit as she walked away, ensuring she had lifted the red flag on the side of her mailbox.

Rebecca walked through the cold grass again and entered the front door of her house when something hard hit the side of her body. She fell onto the ground, her ankle twisted, biting her lip to keep drawing attention to herself. Rebecca touched the ground, confused and hurt, feeling for anything which may have hit her. Maybe a stone, rock, pinecone, or even stick. There was nothing. Rebecca looked at the trunk of the spruce and then at its fullness, thinking about the presence Ryan spoke of.

Convinced it was kids playing a prank using blackberries growing in the woods, Rebecca looked past the spruce and into the woods. She would occasionally use them in pies she baked. The trail behind the Hatcher's home reached past the cornfield and the pond where people would fish. People would park outside the house on the dead-end street, which annoyed Rebecca, but it was a small price to pay for the land providing so many memories for her kids.

*But kids should be in school now, she thought.*

She wasn't succumbing to insanity—absolutely not! Rebecca was resolute about it. An unseen force propelled her to the ground, directing her towards the front door. There was no other plausible explanation in her mind. Hobbling back inside the house, ascending the stairs, and making her way to the kitchen, Rebecca retrieved a glass from the light-colored wood cabinet and filled it with tap water. Her mouth had become parched, and she sought relief for her swollen throat. After five gulps, Rebecca choked on her pills, struggling to swallow her water. Reluctantly, she admitted to herself she was encountering difficulties with eating and would soon need to transition to a liquid diet. It's approaching. My body is no longer functioning as it should. Rebecca acknowledged her inevitable fate was drawing nearer. She had grown weary from traversing the yard, ascending the stairs—and merely rousing herself to feign strength for her kids this morning.

Rebecca gazed through the kitchen window over the sink, observing shadowy figures in her backyard. They stood at a distance; their outlines outlined against the backdrop of the woods where the property line blurred. With arms outstretched, they remained concealed within the shadows of the trees, their gaze fixed on the sky. The eerie spectacle unsettled her, shrouded in an enigma she couldn't unravel. Yet, deep down, she understood—she always did. It was a knowing passed down, her son inheriting the same intuition. *The boy gets it honest.*

"Not again," she thought, closing her eyelids, an uneasy feeling settling in. She wished for them to disappear, their presence casting a somber atmosphere. Since childhood, she sensed they and others like them needed to move on, yet she remained clueless about how to convey this message. Rebecca reluctantly opened her eyes, finding the dark figures had vanished. However, an ominous intuition lingered, telling her it wouldn't be the last time. "They'll come for me when this bloody disease eventually takes me," she whispered, a foreboding chill running down her spine.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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# I WANT CANDY

The challenge of being at the last stop on a bus route was the limited seating available. Fortunately, Ryan could always count on Colin Hill to have a spot reserved for him as he strolled down the aisle. A quick point at the vacant space, a nod from Colin, and Ryan would happily settle in beside him for the brief journey to school.

Colin wasn't the most approachable person when it came to making friends, not due to unkindness but because of a few idiosyncrasies making socializing challenging. One unmistakable trait was the lingering aroma of cooked cabbage and a hint of meatloaf that clung to him. Additionally, his voice emitted a peculiar croaking sound, a result of his narrow windpipes, accompanied by a lisp which sometimes made it difficult for others to comprehend him. Uninterested in typical childhood activities like collecting cards or climbing trees, Colin kept to himself during recess, finding solace in his shared love for television and movies—a common interest with Ryan.

Ryan, however, never thought to inquire about Colin's ethnicity. It simply didn't cross his mind. Colin, his bus companion, didn't fit the mold of the stereotypical white kids commonly found in Norton. With darker skin than Ryan, Colin's background remained a mystery. He eventually mustered the courage to ask, uncovering Colin's Hispanic roots, though the details were unclear. Back then, the concept of race held little significance in Ryan's childhood perspective.

"Want a Crunch bar? My mom gave me a bag for the kids in my classes," Ryan generously offered, extending the bag to Colin. The gesture brought a spark to Colin's eyes, momentarily lifting him from his usual drowsy demeanor. "Oh, yeah! Sweet!" he exclaimed, reaching into the bag. "I've never had one of these before." Stunned by this revelation, Ryan inquired, "Really?"

"My mom doesn't usually let us have much candy," Colin explained, shoving the whole party sized chocolate bar into his mouth. Ryan nodded and slumped in his seat with his knees resting on the pleather seat in front as he removed his Garbage Pail Kid doubles, even triples. It wasn't a tiny stack, either. Ryan already had a pile of cards in his collection as thick as a

double cheeseburger from Swenson's Drive-In. Colin looked over to Ryan, thumbing through his cards and putting them in number order, amazed at how many he had. He thought it was so *cool*, but it made him envious, even jealous.

An eerie sensation washed over Ryan, leaving him with an unsettling feeling—the distinct impression of being watched by an unseen presence. Amidst the conversation of other kids, a high-pitched noise cut through, one Ryan recognized all too well. It wasn't the discomfort of being spied on; it was the unmistakable sound of giggling girls engaging in gossip.

Turning around, Ryan spotted Christina talking to her friend Michelle, both sharing laughter. Christina caught Ryan's gaze and nervously waved. Internal turmoil gripped Ryan. *Is she sharing the secret I confided in her, that massive revelation? I trusted her... wait. Maybe it's not what I think. She has never betrayed me before. It's probably nothing. Yeah, nothing.* Shaking off his unease, Ryan mustered a smile and nervously waved back.

“What did you have for breakfast?”

Only catching part of the question, Ryan turned toward Colin and asked, “What did you say?”

“What did you have to eat this morning?” Colin repeated. Confused, Ryan inquired, “Why?”

“Just curious,” he replied.

“Eggs,” Ryan answered. Colin nodded, hesitating before posing another question. “Fried or scrambled?”

“Scrambled.”

“So, when your mom makes them, does she just crack the egg in the pan and push it around as it cooks?”

Ryan, recalling Colin's penchant for asking questions, realized his bus companion was always curious about others' lives. Colin would string together one question after another, ensuring the conversation flowed smoothly. To his credit, he never crossed any boundaries; most inquiries were general.

“She cracks the eggs into a bowl, adds a bit of milk, maybe some salt and pepper, then stirs it and pours it into the pan,” Ryan explained, introducing a new breakfast technique to Colin. “What's the point of the milk?” Colin wondered. Ryan chuckled and replied, “I think it makes the eggs fluffier.” From a small pocket in his bookbag, Colin produced a small spiral bound pad and jotted down Ryan's insights as if taking an order.

“Cool. Thanks!” Colin concluded the round of questioning. “Did you watch Perfect Strangers last Friday? Wasn’t it great when Balki—”

“Hey, Colin! Interested in snagging the doubles of my doubles?” Ryan interjected, displaying a few cards from his stack. *Sometimes, you just had to derail that train*; put a quarter in him, and Colin would make you listen to the whole thing.

“Whoa! Seriously?” Colin exclaimed, finding it hard to believe someone would give him something for nothing. Ryan nonchalantly shrugged, downplaying the gesture. “No problem. They’ll probably just sit in the stack and fade if you don’t use them.” For once, Colin remained silent, mouth hanging open as he scrutinized the grotesque images adorned with clever names on his new cards. A small wheeze gradually escalated with each breath Colin took. Concerned, Ryan looked over at his friend and inquired, “Do you have asthma or something?” Colin slowly tore his gaze from the new bubblegum cards and shrugged, uncertain. “Sounds like you’re not breathing right,” Ryan added. Colin glanced back at his cards, feeling embarrassed. “I don’t know. Maybe. We don’t get to go to the doctor much, and I don’t want to ask. It’s just how I’ve always breathed.”

Ryan rested his head on the seat, trusting Colin would figure it out soon. The vinyl seat beneath him bore the scars of bored kids who had pierced it with pencils and pens, a testament to old-fashioned vandalism. Recalling the girl chuckles from a few minutes earlier, Ryan glanced over at Christina talking to others, unknowingly admiring her from afar. He closed his eyes, waiting for the bus to arrive at school, anticipating the candy fueled chaos awaiting in the halls and classrooms.

As Ryan had expected, it had been a typical school day, with candy wrappers—mainly Tootsie Roll—scattered across the school floors. Some students had dressed up for the holiday, while teachers and guidance counselors made efforts to ensure no masks, especially rubber ones, were worn on the premises.

Halloween no longer held the excitement it once did for Ryan as he grew older. The only aspect he appreciated about the day was the opportunity to be outside on an autumn night. The brisk air and the colored leaves beginning to show were more appealing to Ryan than the holiday festivities.

Lunchtime, typically the half-hour of the day most students looked forward to, was a daunting experience for Ryan, especially when Scott

wasn't around. On the first day, he always felt like the awkward kid trying to find a place to sit. The decision of where to sit was only half of his unease; the other half was dealing with Stephanie Melker, Ryan's grade school stalker.

If there was ever a person Ryan needed to fear, aside from Eric Flanagan, it was Stephanie. She had been overly fond of Ryan and had developed a crush he had no intention of reciprocating. As each day passed, her infatuation seemed to intensify. Stephanie, with her charming demeanor, brown curly hair, freckles, and sharp intellect, had started physically getting closer to Ryan more often. She aimed to kiss him at inappropriate times in the halls, which were all times for him. Stephanie resembled the human, female version of Pepe le Pew from Looney Tunes, constantly rubbing herself against him, hoping for reciprocation. Ryan vividly recalled one instance when she had pinned him against the school building's brick exterior. She leaned in for a kiss, only to be interrupted by his need to catch the bus home. Swiftly, he slipped out from under her arms.

*That was tense.*

Stephanie spotted Ryan sitting alone in the lunchroom. It hadn't crossed his mind to inquire if he could join Christina at her table. She consistently sat with her girlfriends, and perhaps she preferred not to have a guy interfere with their discussions or gossip. Nevertheless, as Ryan bit into his hamburger, Stephanie turned towards him, contemplating whether she should approach.

"Scoot," a longing voice demanded. Ryan slid over on the picnic style seating, making room for Stephanie to sit. Christina resentfully glared at the sight of Ryan and Stephanie sitting together. From Ryan's perspective, he intended to be friendly by offering her a seat. To Christina, he seemed uncomfortable and in need of rescuing, which was somewhat true. Christina was aware of Stephanie's intentions and felt a surge of jealousy. "Do you eat a lot of meat?" Stephanie asked Ryan as she slurped the last of her chocolate milk through a straw. Ryan shifted his eyes downward, sensing the density in the room and movement under his nose.

The meat in Ryan's hamburger had turned raw, pulsating as it spilled over the sides. Observing the meat move, heaving as if it were breathing, Ryan ceased chewing his wadded hamburger with a hint of ketchup as the taste became unbearable. As Stephanie's lecture dissolved into the background, images of the man with the mutilated throat from his yard



came to mind. The fresh meat began to separate as a slit materialized and moved, seemingly talking to Ryan.

*Stop it. End it. We know the path. Don't go out tonight,* the voice gargled, making a whisper towards the end, *do not follow.* The head of the man in the dark tracksuit, glared at Ryan, watching him upside down as he shifted on the floor, forward from the other side of the table where legs dangle. The man grasped his torn throat, gurgling the blood pouring from his wound. He struggled to say more to Ryan as Stephanie's voice grew louder until Ryan looked away, throwing up what meat remained in his mouth. *He's gone now. It's over,* Ryan told himself as he poised himself to play off his disturbing vision.

"Do you know what kind of chemicals you could be ingesting by eating that?" she asked. With an eyebrow raised, Ryan looked down at the burger. With bated breath, he answered, "This is school food. I don't think this is probably considered real beef." Stephanie laughed. Not knowing what he said that was so humorous, while attempting to make light of what he had just witnessed, he nervously laughed along with her.

In addition to her deep attraction to Ryan, Stephanie was also a know-it-all. She relished lecturing students on societal wrongs, regardless of whether they welcomed it. One of her focal points was announcing her dietary habits.

Taking her laugh and integrating it into the conversation again, Stephanie leaned in and pointed out, "You ever notice the boobs coming in on the sixth graders are a little too, um, big for their age? You know why?" Ryan shyly looked up and around to see what Stephanie was talking about and then back down to his lunch tray to find nothing was there other than school food.

"It's because of the chicken," she declared.

Ryan nodded, attempting to grasp what she had just as his vision dissipated, "Wait. What? What do you mean?"

Stephanie arched her back, poised to deliver a concise dissertation on the pitfalls of eating meat. "Steroids," she simplified with one word before continuing. "Farmers are now pumping chickens full of steroids, so they grow faster, resulting in a quicker turnaround time from hatch to consumption. However, the steroids remain in the meat, causing both men and women to develop faster when they are young."

"That's an interesting theory," Ryan admitted.

“Theory?” she scoffed, “What is the one thing girls eat the most of nowadays?” Ryan shrugged but then considered what his mother and younger sister always ordered at restaurants. “Chicken fingers?” he guessed, feigning ignorance of the answer.

“Chicken fingers,” Steph affirmed.

Suddenly, Christina sat on the other side of Ryan, intervening to rescue him from the lecture and any potential flirting Stephanie might engage in or attempt in the coming seconds. Christina didn’t understand what they were discussing, but she knew Stephanie liked Ryan and wanted to prevent her from making him uncomfortable. Her attempt to play the hero demonstrated to Ryan she cared, hopefully thwarting any chance of his interest in someone else.

“Oh my God, Stephanie! Your pearls! They look so good on you. I wish I had the confidence to put on old people’s jewelry, but *you* can definitely pull it off!” Christina came in with a petty backhanded compliment. Stephanie did love her pearls. She wore a pair around her neck every day at school, intending to showcase her parent’s social status, but it often came across as pretentious. Stephanie, an eighth grader, attempted to emulate a businesswoman’s attire on some days, donning plaid skirts and blazers with massive shoulder pads. Her parents were members of the Fairlawn Country Club—the one that infamously denied membership to two Goodyear executives because they were black. Ryan never understood why she was so interested in him; he wasn’t from an affluent family or had any notable connections. Perhaps girls enjoyed bringing home a boy they knew their parents would disapprove of.

Stephanie Melker smiled, fully aware of Christina White’s game, choosing to engage in a round of snide remarks disguised as compliments. “Thank you!” Steph began, gritting her teeth, “I saw you with that cute hat this morning! I love it! It’s like you’re taking *someone* else’s style and making it *your* own. It’s so cute!” They both laughed at their condescending compliments with stride, aware they would bother each other for the rest of the day. Ryan was conscious of their cattiness towards one another. Listening to them entertained him. He grinned, tucking in his lips to keep from laughing while the girls exchanged their backhanded insults like a couple of gunslingers. Ryan found it oddly complimentary they wanted him to themselves. *This is actually a guy’s dream*, he thought.

Ryan never considered himself anyone special. He wasn't popular, didn't excel at anything, and didn't have a penchant for sports. Content with being in the background most of the time, he believed as long as he was friendly and earned good grades, it was all that mattered—at least, according to his mother. Perhaps, though, that's what drew the attention of both Christina and Stephanie.

“So, what were you two talking about?” Christina pretended to care.

“Well, I was just telling Ryan here about the dangers of eating meat,” Stephanie informed, her bottom lip quivering dramatically, “and all the additives they put in animals and how it affects our bodies.” She placed her hand on her chest, emphasizing the presumed role of hormones in chicken.

“Really?” Christina asked with indifference.

“Yes. I mean, when you think about it, how can you eat such beautiful creatures?” Stephanie mused. Christina sucked in her lips and nodded, seemingly agreeing, but Ryan knew better. He began to smile, sensing insincerity. *Here it comes.*

“So, are you being rhetorical, or do you want some recipes?” The condescension from Christina was palpable. Ryan's eyes widened, unable to believe the comeback and burn shooting from his friend's mouth.

Stephanie, unamused, placed her tongue against the back of her bottom front teeth, searching for a comeback to rival Christina's highbrow insult. She rose from her seat, put her hand on Josh's shoulder, leaned down, and kissed him on the cheek. With a contemptuous smile aimed at Christina, Steph whispered, “Bye. I'll *definitely* see you later, Ryan.” Christina squinted and smirked at Steph with rage in her eyes as she walked away. Ryan looked at his friend differently than he had before. After several years of friendship, something about Christina felt natural, not in a familiar friendship kind of way.

Christina turned her face to Ryan's and, with a raised eyebrow, stated, “Whaddabitch.” Ryan choked on his food at the rude but amusing statement. “You, me, and Scott tonight, right?” she asked regarding trick-or-treating that evening. Nodding his head, “Yeah, well, LayLoo will hang around. I'm not sure what Devin and Valerie are doing, but Eric will probably be there, and I want to stay away from him.”

“Why?” she wondered.

“Well, I kind of said some things that may have pissed him off a little bit.”

Surprised, Christina scooted closer to him, teasing, “My, my. The quiet, passive boy in school, Ryan Hatcher, finally grew a pair. What happened? I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

“I insulted his car and may have implied he needed dental work,” he quickly countered. She took a fry from Ryan’s tray, shoved it in her mouth, and mumbled, “You’re right. You’re dead where you stand.” He shrugged his shoulder and nodded, thinking, tell me something I don’t know. A senior began to play a local radio station with a boombox he toted around, playing “Obsession” by Animotion echoing through the cafeteria.

“I’ll see you tonight, champ. Grandma is taking me to get my costume on layaway. So, I won’t be on the bus.” The good news continued as Ryan would have to walk home with his little sister with no other witnesses if Eric decided to beat the piss out of him. “You’re welcome, by the way, for interfering with Miss Nose in the Air.” Ryan mouthed thank you as she began to walk away, but something told her to stop and say something to her friend. Christina opened her mouth to Ryan’s right ear and whispered, insinuating, “You can do better than her, Ryan. Don’t settle. Be brave and go for what you want.”

*You are an obsession. You’re my obsession. Who do you want me to be to make you—the chorus of the song blared.*

Ryan’s dark green eyes looked into Christina’s blues. They were face to face, staring at one another. He began to blush, and she pictured kissing him on the mouth. It would be the first for both, but neither would move closer. Instead, they looked away, embarrassed, thinking one wouldn’t want the other to kiss them—but they both wanted to.

She’d felt this way about Ryan for a couple of years now. He never left her as a friend, no matter how needy she came across. Christina knew how she could sometimes get with her insecurities, but it didn’t matter to Ryan. He remained her friend and got to know her grandparents over the years—he even calls them grandma and grampa.

Ryan never had romantic thoughts of Christina until recently. When his mother discovered her cancer, she was there to hear him talk about anything he wanted to. When he finally brought his mother up, risking embarrassment by becoming emotional, Christy made sure not to interrupt him and just listened. *That’s all anybody wants*, she had thought. It was the first time she had seen him cry as a young adult. He would if he was hurt when they were kids or if someone wasn’t playing fair. This time was

different because it was the cry of a broken heart. Ryan knew Christina White meant more to him than he had realized that day but became afraid to tell her because of the risk of ruining a friendship. Having starry eyed thoughts for someone new feels wonderful as we paint ourselves a perfect canvas of the future, but the realization of new feelings for someone familiar makes us unsure and anxious.

“I’ll see you tonight,” she repeated before walking away, a tinge of embarrassment coloring her departure. Ryan nodded in acknowledgment and observed her navigating to another table, attempting to embrace a more sociable persona.

The day trudged along, and all Ryan yearned for was to board any bus and head home to his mom. The remainder of the school day crawled at a sluggish pace. The oversized clocks, with their loud second hands at the front of each class, seemed almost mocking, making time appear to drag. Ryan pondered the necessity of such large clocks—perhaps they were synchronized with the school bell?

At last, 2:30 PM arrived, and the students dispersed from their classes like cockroaches scattering in a grimy gas station bathroom when the halogen lights flicker on. Amid the chaos, with girls and boys shouting and hooting, Ryan descended the stairs on the south end of the school, leading to the bus area. Running his hands along the brick wall, he turned to step onto the last flight of stairs and felt the smooth wood handle coated with sealant under his fingertips. Had Scott and Christina been around, Ryan wouldn't have thought twice about soaking in the sounds and textures of Norton Intermediate. Unbeknownst to him, these would be the minute details he'd cherish when reflecting on his life.

Stepping onto the bus, ready to find a seat, Ryan initially scanned for Christina, only to discover she had chosen a spot next to her best friend, Michelle. Instinct nudged him to sit behind them, but the memory of being near Michelle, who seemed to marinate herself in Malibu Musk perfume every morning, dissuaded him. While Michelle was a delightful person and amiable to Ryan, the overpowering scent was a bit much.

Instead, he located his younger friend, Colin, and settled beside him. “Did you want to sit in the aisle? You get off before I do,” Ryan inquired. “Nah,” Colin rejected as he gazed out the filthy bus window adorned with cobwebs between the adjustable top and the stationary bottom. Ryan nodded and reclined, contemplating what to say next.

"Are you going out tonight?" Colin turned towards Ryan. "Yeah, we just roam up and down the street a bit. It's a busy road, so we've got to be careful not to venture too far."

"Do your parents not go with you?" Ryan inquired, curious about the restrictions.

Colin looked down and sighed, "No. Mother has to take care of the babies at home. So, she wants us not to venture out too far."

"I see," Ryan disingenuously agreed, changing the subject. "What are you going as?"

"Just a ghost. Had some sheets with holes already in them, so, you know, why not?" Colin shrugged. Ryan began to realize Halloween wasn't a big deal to Colin; he seemed melancholy about the entire day.

"Oh!" Colin exclaimed with excitement. "My birthday is two weeks away, and I'm allowed to invite someone. Can you come?"

It was a moment when Ryan had to think fast. He couldn't help but ponder how his house would look or smell—*does it smell the way he does?* It was one thing to endure a barrage of questions on a twenty-minute bus ride, but to go in and have to listen for multiple hours—*I just don't know.* Ryan pulled out a pad of paper and handed it to Colin.

"Just write down the day and your phone number. I'll ask my mom to see if we are doing anything that day." Ryan recognized it was not ideal to back out due to superficial reasons. He didn't want to play the "dying mom" card because it's a dick move, but he also preferred to keep such personal matters private. The last thing he wanted was the fake attention that came with receiving condolences from people who never bothered to talk to him in the first place. *Maybe it's a less than ideal perspective, but it's how I feel. It's not about them.*

Colin seized the pen and paper to jot down his information. "What do you have planned?" Ryan asked. Colin's eyes lit up, excited to share. "Probably just pizza and a movie. Nothing that hasn't been done a hundred times."

"I like pizza, so that's cool." Ryan approved, acknowledging the decision wasn't solely his to make. Silence enveloped them both until the bus turned onto Hametown Road, where Colin lived.

"So, if you have to pick a meat on your pizza, would it be pepperoni or sausage?" Colin abruptly asked. Here we go again. "Do you like anchovies? I don't know a single person who does. What about onion?" The barrage of

pizza related questions flowed from Colin's mouth. Ryan sighed, leaned back, and answered each one until Colin had to get off the bus.

Multiple kids exited with him when the bus pulled up to Colin's house. They all sprinted towards a blue, dilapidated looking house kids gossiped about daily. Ryan assumed they were a close-knit group who spent time together after school, and he thought, *it's good he had other people to hang out with*. At least he would have others around if he didn't come to Colin's in a couple of weeks. Ryan committed to attending Colin's party, little did he know it might become one of the best things he would ever do.





# CHAPTER NINE

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# THE SAFETY DANCE

The news of multiple animal attacks had given the locals an excuse to carry their registered weapons in holsters attached to their belts. Residents and their quasi-neighborhood watch program consisted of meeting once a year as an excuse to drink and grill out. They gathered on the street next to the Hatcher's home, in front of the woods, for Halloween night.

Even though they didn't care for one another, the Hatchers and the Donovans met, helping keep an eye out as an excuse for their wives to gossip and catch up. Despite Rick and Calvin not speaking for reasons they weren't sure of; they had always been civil. Two men, both depressed and alcoholics, for opposite reasons; one had been out of work, and the other because he had to work, not realizing what he was getting into when hired.

News of the Musicland employee who died from being mauled had spread. The only person who knew any information in the neighborhood was Calvin Hatcher, a district manager for Musicland for upper Ohio and western Pennsylvania. "Did you know the kid?" Rick asked with a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in hand. Calvin responded with his hands buried deep inside his Notre Dame hoodie's pockets, "I met him once. He didn't work at the store long. He seemed like a good kid, ya know?" They all nodded, not knowing what to say next. "Is what they're sayin' on the news and radio pretty close to the truth," Silvia Donovan, Rick's wife, asked.

"I didn't see the body but going by the people who saw it. Yeah, he was pretty torn up," Calvin responded, wishing he had a drink in his hand.

Silvia Donovan was the least vocal of the four, standing around, waiting for their kids to come out in their costumes. She looked and dressed older than her age, sporting large glasses with the neck cord attached to the arms for convenience and long skirts with long sleeved button-up blouses. The dresses in her wardrobe were mainly denim, flowered, or khaki colored. Rick joked her khaki skirts made her look like a Mormon.

Adults roaming the street sans weapons wasn't a new concept. For the last few years, someone, or maybe individuals, has begun vandalizing houses and cars with toilet paper and eggs, occasionally with a side of

graffiti. They all knew who the culprit was as they watched Eric Flanagan walk up the street with Valerie and Scott.

Rick Donovan gave Eric the ‘ol stink eye from a hundred feet away, disgruntled his daughter was dating a thug. There was a hint of irony coming from someone who liked knocking around his family when he had too much to drink. What made him more concerned was what Valerie was wearing—a white leotard and leggings with pointed pink ears and makeup to make her look like a cat—a sexy cat, the default hot girl costume.

Scott wore something, well, a bit more casual. Next to her, Eric wore a white lab coat with torn off sleeves with a fake tattoo of a heart impaled by an arrow. It was accompanied by a pair of black Z. Cavaricci pants, a white tee shirt, and a blue Fisher-Price stethoscope from a child's pretend medical kit. The adults couldn't help but notice Eric carrying a black bookbag. "What the hell are you supposed to be?" Rick scoffed as he looked at the bag straps on his shoulders. Eric looked down at his outfit, "Oh! Yeah. I'm the love doctor." Music to a father's ears.

Rebecca rolled her eyes as she shivered from the cool nighttime breeze. "Do you want my coat, dear," Cal offered his wife. Rebecca stubbornly held her hand up, indicating she would be fine without it. He took his coat off anyways and shoved it towards his wife, knowing she was hateful because she thought she needed to. Rebecca snatched the coat from Cal with one quick movement, huffing as she put it on. "I'll see what's taking the kids so long," Calvin groaned as he made his way towards the garage.

Once inside, Calvin turned left to open the closet and grabbed a coat off the hanger to replace the one he gave his wife. "C'mon, you all! Time to get this party started!" he yelled from the bottom of the stairs. Cal was putting on a fake demeanor tonight, for Layla more than anyone. He felt hated by his family. He was there, not just because he was obligated but to show he could be better...*I am better.*

Ryan was the first to emerge from the middle landing with a leopard vest over a white tee shirt and grey slacks. "Who are you supposed to be?" his father asked. Putting his thumbs under his vest, pushing the print forward, "Bueller...Ferris Bueller."

Devin stomped down the stairs, annoyed he was even going out. "Aren't I a little old to be trick or treating now?" Calvin shrugged, suggesting, "You don't have to, but I think Valerie thought you were hanging out with them tonight." Devin hated his dad knew how to play him. It was even more

embarrassing he harbored deep affection for Valerie, yet chose to keep it concealed, as though it were a shameful secret known to all. Although with Devin's teenage temperament, he would become angry if someone brought it up.

Indifferently, Devin threw the string connected to a cereal box filled with plastic knives stuck inside it around his neck with attitude as he scoffed. With a box marked "Cereal Killer" in red ink laying over his red flannel shirt, Devin put his hands in the air, palms up, and asked, "Well?"

"Clever," his dad answered, thinking he could have just said Judd Nelson from *The Breakfast Club* with his outfit. It would have been easier than the time it took to make the "outfit" he had on. "Make sure you get candy for me," Cal playfully demanded, attempting to be friendly towards his eldest. Devin bumped shoulders with his father and muttered, "Whatever," as he made his way to the garage.

Dressed to the nines in a pink dress with silver sequins and a lovely plastic crown, her majesty Layla Hatcher graced her subjects with her divine presence. She slowly descended the staircase, letting the boys soak in her splendor.

"Are you ready for the annual Trick or Treat celebration?" Calvin asked Layla, bowing. Layla curtsied and answered with a thicker version of her mother's accent, "Yes, daddy. Tonight, will be splendid, with this being the best year thus far." Ryan shook his head, cutting his eyes towards his father, suggesting the drama was a bit much. *I've got to give her credit. She knows how to stay in character*, Ryan thought. Calvin wondered if his kid had been watching too many animated Disney films, forgetting reality.

They all began to leave the house until Calvin told Ryan to wear a jacket because it was too cold. Ryan reached into the closet with a grin and pulled out his dad's grey leather coat, which looked like what Matthew Broderick wore in the film.

Ryan walked up his driveway to find Scott wearing khaki pants and a Red Wings jersey, dressed as Ferris's best friend, Cameron Fry, from the eighties classic. "I can't believe you went with it!" Ryan yelled in excitement. Scott smiled, glad to see the surprise on his friend's face. "A bet is a bet," Scott shrugged with his hands in his pockets for warmth. There is always one kid who never needed a coat when it was freezing outside, and Scott was the one to fill the spot. "I couldn't find any proof of where they were in that scene."

The bet Scott referred to was the pool scene in Ferris Bueller's Day Off, where the three main characters were hanging out at someone's house after visiting the city—whose house were they at? The popular theory was Ferris's best friend's house, Cameron, because they were still wet when trying to take the miles off the Ferrari. Still, Ryan's rebuttal was the house didn't appear to have the same siding, and there was no pool in the exterior shot. However, Scott argued Cameron's place was in the woods, with many leaves in the water. The only way to be sure was to see the house when Ferris called him outside near the film's start, but there was no good shot of the house in the frame. The bet between friends was if Scott could prove which house it was without a shadow of a doubt—he lost and had to dress up as the best friend character. Only later on in life did they learn the truth.

The parents gave the kids the typical 'be careful of people' talk they provided annually as Ryan watched Eric threaten him. "I'm going to get you," he mouthed to Ryan. Since the urban legend of a razor being hidden in a candy bar started a few years prior, parents were always on full alert during and after candy fetching. The rant wasn't for the older kids, just the youngest one who had a penchant for snacking on chocolate before arriving home—Layla.

The older kids, Devin, Eric, and Valerie, went to the other end of Holiday Heights, near Wadsworth Road. The younger ones began their candy crusade near the Hatcher's house, where Rebecca gave away the first batch of treats. It was time for Ryan's crew to meet Christina at her grandmother's house and then make their way around.

"Oh, my gosh! Don't you all look great!" Christina's grandmother Josephine, or Jo, gushed, looking down at Layla's princess costume. When she looked up, Ryan knew from her expression she didn't know what the hell he and Scott were supposed to be. "Christy's coming down in a sec. She's getting the final details on the outfit," she explained. Putting her hand next to her mouth, Jo leaned in and whispered, "I don't care for it myself, but I can't make her change it now."

This interested Ryan, wondering what Christina would come down the stairs as.

Scott meandered around the front porch and eventually onto the lawn because he couldn't help but move around. Ryan wondered if his best friend had an anxiety or attention disorder because he could never stay still long

enough to have a meaningful conversation. Ryan liked walking with him; at least they could talk for a bit then.

An angel emerged from the front door, a fallen angel with blonde hair. Christina looked around for someone to praise her outfit, especially Ryan. It was hard not to look at her. If it weren't for the low-cut sweater showing some cleavage, the torn bottom revealing her midriff caught the boys' attention. She was ready to go, wearing black boots, thigh high fishnet stockings, black wings strapped to her back and shoulders, and bright red lipstick.

"What do you think?" she asked, waving her hands in front of her, curious about Ryan's opinion on her outfit.

"I think you look evil," Layla answered playfully, smiling with a wrinkled nose, making claws with her hands. Christina put up her hands, pretending to fight with her. Scott looked her up and down and joked, "I think you need to let Jesus into your heart. Do you have a moment to talk about our lord and savior?" Christina punched Scott in the arm as she walked past him. Layla followed her like a puppy, clinging to every word coming from her mouth.

"Well?" she asked Ryan, the opinion she cared about most.

Ryan looked her up and down again as those strange feelings towards her came back, causing him to blush. "I think you look like a badass," he answered. It wasn't the answer she was looking for, but it was good enough from the guy who rarely says what he thinks. She smiled and gestured for the rest to come along.

Now it was time to get the candy.

The first house they approached was undeniably the creepiest of all. Mr. Gleeson, the resident, had a tradition of placing a rocking chair outside his door every year. He would sit in it, adorned with a scarecrow mask and costume, holding a candy bowl with a sign urging visitors to take only one piece of candy. Despite this being an established practice for several years, people still questioned if there was actually someone inside the costume. The psychology behind it remained unexplained, yet each year, someone would attempt to poke or prod the person within the costume—an older man who lived alone and found joy in frightening kids when he lunged.

However, not everyone fell victim to his antics. If only one kid approached, he would make a slight movement to startle them. Still, he would only lunge at a group of kids. This year, the old man donned the

familiar scarecrow outfit, but there was a notable change—a carved pumpkin, a jack-o'-lantern, replacing the burlap sack head. *Maybe he's not in costume this year.*

The jack-o'-lantern had thin black material covering the eyes, nose, and its crooked smile. Those familiar with visiting this man's house on Halloween knew what to expect, but newcomers always had the best reactions. The candy bucket sat on the lap with the note, and the body remained the same—*what was this old man up to?*

Taking a deep breath, Ryan puffed out his chest, then exhaled as he approached the scarecrow figure. Reluctantly, he pulled a piece of candy from the tub, not discovering what he had chosen until he rejoined Scott and Christy waiting down the driveway.

“Not so bad,” Ryan shrugged, hoping his heart rate would slow. “Please, you couldn’t wait to get away from it,” Scott teased. *He's not wrong*, Ryan thought, scoffing at the notion he was afraid, not giving in to Scott’s accusation. “Then you go do it and see if it jumps at you or not,” Ryan suggested with wide eyes, daring his friend. Christy shook her head at the scaredy cats she had as friends. “I’ll go.” Christy walked up the driveway toward Mr. Gleeson’s front porch, biting her lip as her hand got closer. The rocking chair moved as a heavy wind came through, causing her to step back. *Maybe there's nothing underneath except for stuffing*, Christy thought, *that's why the rocking chair moved.*

The group watched as Christy debated if she was going for the candy bowl. “I bet she doesn’t do it,” Scott said, looking for a wager. Layla looked up at him and shook her head, disappointed in Scott’s lack of faith. “You’re wrong! Christina is a warrior who never goes back on a challenge, you ignoramus.” Scott looked over at Ryan, not believing what his little sister had just said to him. Ryan chuckled at his little sister, giving her a quiet low five; he didn’t know she had it in her. “Better watch out, you little trout sniffer, your turn in coming,” Scott looked down on Layla. She looked up and stuck her tongue out at Scott, retaliating without needing to call him names. It was her way of taking the high road.

Christy walked back towards the scarecrow with the pumpkin head, slowly reached into the bowl, and looked into its black triangle eyes, smiling like she knew a foul secret. She searched through the bowl for a Three Musketeers fun size, eventually finding it. It was her favorite.

She placed her treat in her black bag matching her outfit and walked up to Scott, pointing at him. “Your turn, slick. Let’s see if you can do it there, big shot,” she dared him. Scott moved his shoulders, getting them loose as if he were about to run a marathon or get into a fight. “It’s getting candy from a bowl, stop being dramatic about it and go down there!” Ryan teased. Scott looked at his friend with an eyebrow raised, “I don’t think I like this being more vocal thing you got goin’ on lately.”

“Stop stalling,” Ryan replied, protruding his front teeth, shaking his head as people do to insult another. Throwing his arms in the air, Scott confidently walked down the driveway. As he grabbed a small wrapper of Smarties, a hand covered in an old gardening glove clutched his. The scarecrow in the chair convulsed as it rose from the seat, scaring Scott and knocking the candy over. It stood upright as its head wobbled, too heavy to stand straight.

“Sweet fucking Christ!” Scott shouted into the air ringing into the night, alerting others to his presence. Mr. Gleeson laughed through the cloth covering the pumpkin’s mouth, holding his chest as he sat back down to get ready for the following people to come along. Ryan, Christina, and Layla laughed at Scott and his tough guy approach. Scott avoided looking at them, saying, “This is lame. Let’s go.” He walked in front of Ryan and Christina as they mocked his so-called bravery, but they couldn’t leave yet—it was Layla’s turn.

The rest had forgotten to let her grab her treat, assuming she would be too scared to walk toward Mr. Gleeson. The group began to walk away until Christina stopped them and pointed towards Layla, marching up the driveway. As she grew closer to the man in the chair, she stuck out her bottom lip, pressing her finger against it, wondering if she had made a mistake. She stopped a few feet in front of him and, with her squeaky voice, asked, “Could you please not scare this year, mister? Can you be nice to me?” Mr. Gleeson was so taken by her sweetness, he sat up in his chair, nodded, and brought the bowl closer to her. He invited her to take some candy, indicating he would not be frightening. Layla slowly reached her hand in and pulled out a pouch of chewy sweets. She grinned at Mr. Gleeson, wondering what he looked like under the mask, thanked him, and ran back to her brother.

They expressed their gratitude to Mr. Gleeson, savoring a moment destined to linger in their memories—an act of kindness amid a night of



tricks. Scott sulked for a couple of houses, but his mood lifted when he spotted the Hutchinsons distributing whole candy bars, a rare treat. Credit was given to Mr. Gleeson; his commitment to the scarecrow act, with his head in a smelly gutted out pumpkin, earned admiration.

After several stops, Ryan observed Layla's peculiar habit when receiving candy. She would sit on the curb in front of the house and consume the treat before catching up with the rest of the group. Layla ingested the candy swiftly, keeping it discreet. The discomfort on her face during each house visit led her brother to suspect something was amiss. Ryan intervened when she sat down to eat a small wrapper of gummy worms.

"Layloo? What are you doing?" She took a deep breath and explained, "I'm eating candy in front of the people's houses." "Yeah, I get that, but why?" Ryan inquired, crouching to her level. "Because you have to show the people you appreciate the food," she answered, confused as to why her brother didn't know such a simple thing. Laughing to himself, Ryan clarified, "I think you have that mixed up with restaurants somehow. Like if you eat a steak without A1, that's a compliment to the chef, or if you burp after eating. Something like that." Unsure if what Ryan told her was correct, Layla slowly stood and walked uncomfortably with her older brother.

They were halfway through the neighborhood, and it was time for Ryan to visit his favorite house. Much like Mr. Gleeson's annual scarecrow costume, the next home they came to was occupied by an older gentleman dressed in the same outfit. Ryan never found out who they were because they mostly kept to themselves. Still, the husband would come to the door extremely tall, wearing an authentic looking Darth Vader getup sans the heavy asthmatic breathing and blinking lights. Ryan and Scott always hoped to hear the man talk, expecting him or the mask to sound like James Earl Jones, but he never did. This was the year. They just knew it.

"Trick or Treat!" all four yelled as the man with a shiny black helmet looked down upon the kids wanting candy and to hear his voice. The giant man reached into a glass bowl, took a handful of candy, and put it in Scott's bag first. It was the time of night when trick-or-treating began to die down, which meant the neighbors started willingly giving away more of their stash. If their bags, full of goodies with the occasional box of raisins, weren't full enough, they were about to be.

"How long have you had your costume?" Scott inquired, encouraging the tall man to speak. The man treated him to an imitation of Vader's breathing. It was more of a reaction than they had ever received before. They all silently celebrated, pumping their fists and hopping around as other kids walked in front of the house, wondering if something was mentally wrong with them. Layla didn't understand why they celebrated because she had never watched the movie from a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

When Layla stepped up to get her candy, she looked up and told the nice, tall man, "I like your cape." The man nodded under the helmet and patted her head to say thanks without speaking. Ryan smiled and waved goodbye, saying, "See you next year!" forgetting he may not. Tonight, would become bittersweet as Ryan and his friends would be in high school the following year. They would celebrate Halloween but not the children's way of doing so—not like this.

Meanwhile, the older kids, Devin Hatcher, Valerie Donovan, and Eric Flanagan, weren't exactly trick-or-treating. Devin served as a lookout, aiding Eric's insatiable urge to toilet paper or egg others' private property, while Valerie watched, visibly bored. In front of Holiday Heights stood a giant, lone oak tree, showcased off the main road clear of people's houses. However, the neighborhood Gestapo making their rounds and Wadsworth Road's traffic made it impossible to vandalize without being seen.

"Eric, can we just go? Walk somewhere else? This is boring as hell," Valerie whined, brushing off dead leaves from her white cat costume. Eric, irritated he wasn't getting his way and having to hear it from his girlfriend, picked up his backpack full of items. "Just wait! Okay! Anytime now!" he yelled. Devin, stationed in one place, scanned the area to spot one of the older neighbors, a woman, walking down the street. Valerie began to pace, cutting her eyes at Eric as she popped a piece of Wrigley's gum. She looked over to Devin for verification she wasn't wrong. Devin widened his eyes and shrugged his shoulders while Eric's back was turned to him, agreeing with her sentiment.

"Maybe we should go into the woods and do stuff," Devin suggested. Eric turned to him, confused about what he was proposing. "We could at least roll the trees in the woods behind my house if anything. It's better than nothin'."

“Won’t your folks be there since your house is in front of it?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, but they’re probably loaded on beer and snacks, gossipin’ about whatever. They might not even notice.” Valerie agreed and put her head on Eric’s shoulder, a move Devin couldn’t stand. “I think that’s a good idea. The adults are in full force tonight. No one will be in the woods to watch us,” she convinced Eric, batting her eyelashes.

Eric agreed and began to zip up his bag as the old woman walking down the road yelled, “Aren’t you a little too old to be out trick-or-treating?” The term ‘respect your elders’ never sat well with him, so he ignored it.

“Aren’t you a little too old to be living?” he shouted back. The old woman placed her hand on her chest, mouth open, sucking in air, shocked a youngster would say such a thing. “Well, I never!”

“Well, ma’am, maybe that’s just your problem then,” Devin responded, high-fiving Eric as all three ran away. They cut through neighbors’ lawns as they made their way back to Devin’s house to do some damage to the woods.

The drinking had commenced at the Hatcher’s house, and Rebecca was doing her best to play hostess despite Calvin telling her she didn’t need to. Being the inconsiderate man he was when drinking, Rick Donovan kept asking Rebecca, a woman with stomach cancer, to fetch him another Coors. Each time she gave a fake smile, scowling as she walked away.

As much as he tried to avoid it, Calvin’s job and the grisly murder occurring the night before were the main topics. No one had brought it up, but the body behind the Rolling Acres Mall reminded many in the area of the two college girls found in the woods behind it, raped and murdered over two years ago. The two instances only had one common fact; the bodies were discovered behind the mall. The men, no, boys, behind it were convicted, but it didn’t make the act disappear. It made the small towns around it uneasy.

Rick was the mouthpiece that night, trying to get his old friend to admit how much he made at his job. It was the working man’s version of measuring dicks. He didn’t want to know but, for some reason, had to—stupid man bullshit.

“I bet you make about ten more than you did when we worked together,” Rick poked. Calvin took a sip of beer and replied, “Man, I wish. Then it would be worth it.” Silvia sucked her teeth and told her husband,

“Would you just leave him alone about it. What difference does it make now? You ain’t working. You got a decent exit salary. What do you care!”

“I don’t, woman. Jesus! I’m just trying to figure out if I should go white collar like Cal here.” Silvia, the typically voiceless wife at home, had a few too many and decided to be bold, knowing Rick wouldn’t retaliate publicly. “White Collar? Right. That will be the day.” Embarrassed, Rick shot his wife a frustrated look, and she saw the rage in his eyes she would pay for later.

“You wouldn’t want it anyway, Rick,” Calvin claimed. “When you had your job, you had to make sure the people did their jobs and met a quota. For not as much money as you think, my job now requires me to look after several stores scattered through Ohio and some in Pennsylvania, ensuring they do their job and reach damn quotas. The difference between my old job and now is I cater to an entitled public, listening to complaints thrown my way when people don’t get theirs. Not from just one store, mind you—multiple stores. Then I have to investigate and sometimes fire individuals making them lose their way of life. See, it’s harder to fire people in the factories because of union rules, but not with retail.” Calvin sat back in his lawn chair and ruminated on his words. “Lady commerce is a fickle bitch. She looks down on you, counting every failure while rarely acknowledging your successes. That’s what I have to deal with, so if you don’t mind, I would appreciate it if you got off my fuckin’ back and stopped being pissed off over something that doesn’t matter,” he finished.

Rick didn’t know what to make of Calvin’s admission. He was so obsessed with the money it didn’t occur to him about the stress. The Rust Belt had disintegrated already, and people like Rick didn’t know if it would ever come together again. If the manufacturing line spanned from Wisconsin to Upper New York were a car, Akron was the tire manufacturing mecca that had gone flat.

Not even Rebecca knew anything about it; Cal had never told her. It was no wonder he seemed like a changed man to her. Calvin took a job, thinking it was the right thing to do for his family, but didn’t consider what it would do to him. Calvin knew termination from the company was in the cards if he hadn’t taken the Musicland gig, like Rick, but maybe he could have been happier. Rebecca thought he should have said something, wondering if things could have been different.

The clouds in the night sky had disappeared, letting the full moon illuminate Norton, OH, and the woods connecting other townships. The heavy gusts of wind stopped. A foreboding feeling overcame people celebrating in the streets, on their porches, or in their homes. Four mutilated bodies were found over the last two days, and no one had any answers as to why.



# CHAPTER TEN

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# PSYCHO KILLER

“Let’s hang out in the woods!” Scott said with enthusiasm over the worst idea he could have come up with in the moment.

Ryan, Scott, Christina, and Layloo were all walking back to the Hatcher house, where the adults would inevitably drink, who never intended to stop any possible child endangerment or vandalism. It was close to nine o’clock at night. Ryan’s parents had decided to let the kids stay up until eleven, provided it wasn’t a nightmare to get going in the morning. This meant little to Devin, as he would stay in his room and listen to his cassette player for as long as he wanted.

“Or just hear me out—we don’t,” Christina said sarcastically. Layla looked up at Christy and nodded her head in agreement.

“Oh, come on! What’s Halloween if there isn’t a little creepiness involved?” Scott questioned.

“I don’t know, man. Sounds iffy,” Ryan interjected.

“There’s a shocker. Agree with the girlfriend,” Scott mocked. “What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

“That is literally the thing someone says before they get murdered, cursed, or whatever. Have you not seen a horror movie before?” Ryan had become worked up to the point he was over gesturing with his hands so fast Layla thought they would fly away as Christina dodged.

Ryan shook his head, not believing he was about to go along with it. *It’s about time to man up a little*, he thought. In a huff, he replied, “Fine.” Man up was funny because no sensible man or adult would willingly go into the woods at night. Scott pumped his fist, celebrating he might get his way.

Layla tugged on Ryan’s arm and whined, “You’re not going in the woods, are you?” Ryan had to try and sweet talk his sister about not ratting them out when she went home. “Just for a little bit, okay? You go back into the house but be quiet about it, so no one sees you. We won’t be long,” Ryan explained.

“You promise you’ll be fine?” Layla asked with concern in her big eyes. Hesitation came over Ryan when the perfectly normal question children ask came out. He didn’t know how to answer her. Something told him not to



promise such a thing to a little girl because what if something did happen? *Layla would be so disappointed.*

“Don’t diddle dottle, Ryan. Tell your sister it will be fine,” Christy politely asked with raised eyebrows. Ryan looked at Christy, squinting, knowing she was messing with him, and replied, “It’ll be okay. I promise,” in a deadpan voice. Layla went to her house's front door while the adults spoke and drank on the other side.

Ryan watched as she walked through the front door before cutting his eyes at Christy. “Please don’t make me do something like that again,” he asked.

“Why? Are you mad at me?” Christy asked. Scott began to walk onto the path made by people over the years, and Ryan began to follow. As he passed Christy, he informed, “No. I’m not mad, but I made a promise like that to her when my mom went for tests. Turned out it wasn’t okay. Understand?” Christina felt terrible but knew after a few minutes Ryan would be okay. They had disagreements in the past but always came out fine after a few minutes of the silent treatment.

Walking behind Ryan, Christina stared at his backside as he followed Scott. Ryan’s house was in their view as they arrived at an area in the street where the parents could see them if they were paying attention. “Scott,” Ryan murmured. “Get down and be quiet.” Scott brought two fingers to his forehead and pointed them towards Ryan in one fast movement, giving him a ten-four.

Dancing around twigs and dead leaves was like an art form, mastered only by those who routinely navigated heavily wooded areas without their parents' knowledge, dodging obstacles as if they were landmines. The trio had mastered the daytime technique, but the night posed another challenge. *Which leaves are fresh, and which are crusty? Is that a branch or a shadow?*

*Snap-crackle.*

“Shit! Get down!” Scott whispered urgently after stepping on a branch near Ryan’s yard. They dropped to their stomachs, praying not to get caught by the parent brigade. Scott's feet were now in front of Ryan’s face, and all he wanted to do was slap them, so he did. “Ow! What the hell is your problem?”

“Good going, numb nuts. We’re going to get spotted!” Ryan hissed, throwing dirt at Scott.

“We will if you keep talking! Shut up!”

“You shut up!”

Christy kept her head down, shaking it, annoyed by the boys' war of whispered words. A light began to survey the area. Calvin had heard the cracking branch, shining a flashlight their way. They all lay still, waiting for the light to disappear. Ryan wondered if his dad still had a gun on him and if he would have been foolish enough to fire it at them without thinking.

*Oh, shit! One of us might die out here tonight.*

Calvin peered into the woods, looking for the person, or animal, creating the cracking noise. As the adults went on about politics and the upcoming election, he did his due diligence to ensure the outside was as safe as possible. Calvin found nothing in the open space of the woods seen from the patio. As he turned off the flashlight, the trio began crawling slowly on the ground past the bushes where the berries grew until they reached the end of the property line.

In the increasing darkness, time seemed to slip away rapidly. Ryan maneuvered through the undergrowth until he was confident his parents wouldn't spot him. A brisk wind sent shivers down his spine, and the moon's visibility dwindled as clouds veiled its glow. Leaves of red, orange, and yellow twirled in a chaotic dance along the forest floor with each gust.

As Ryan rose to walk, his pinky finger brushed against an unexpected, rigid surface. Before him lay a bloodied, black wing tipped shoe. Instinctively, he closed his eyes, convincing himself it wasn't real, attributing it to a lack of sleep induced hallucination. However, as he raised his gaze, a pale, flesh torn leg with shredded fabric hanging over it confronted him. Not now. Anything but now. The notion of sleep deprivation could explain away this sight no longer held any comfort. What do they want? It's more than one. I know it! Voices whispered to him, a cacophony of cries and screams echoing the moments of death. Ryan pressed his nose against the ground, covering his ears, shutting his eyes, and pleading for the apparition to vanish. He began chanting desperately, hoping it would serve as a plea for the spectral presence to depart. *I don't want to see you—please go away—I just want to get up—please go away—I have nothing for you—please go away.* The words weren't articulate, but they were a fervent plea for release from the haunting encounter.

Ryan felt a force yank him off the ground, his jacket firmly grasped in someone's hand. Panic surged through him as he assumed the entity

haunting his home had finally made a move, tearing him from his family. Swinging his limbs in a desperate attempt to free himself, he caught sight of Scott hovering above him, trying to communicate his friendly assistance amid the chaotic struggle. "What the hell, man!" Scott exclaimed, narrowly avoiding Ryan's flailing fist. Relieved, Ryan got back on his feet, brushing off the soil. "Sorry, I wasn't sure what was grabbing me."

"Who else could it have been? It's just us," Scott inquired, seeking an explanation from his friend. Hopeful only their group inhabited the woods, Ryan looked ahead, suggesting they continue on, sidestepping the question. Scott's expression quickly shifted from concern to delight, resembling a dog discovering a squeaky toy. He sprinted ahead of Ryan and Christina, carefree and oblivious to safety concerns.

"I think we're alone now," Christina hummed, observing the absence of other people nearby. "There doesn't seem to be anyone around," echoed the guys. It was the moment she had eagerly anticipated, and deep down, Ryan felt a similar sentiment. Christina ran up and linked her arm through Ryan's, slipping her hands into his jacket pocket. As he looked at her, he couldn't help but ponder if a grander vision for their costumes would have allowed Christy to dress like Sloane Peterson, Ferris Bueller's girlfriend, completing their group. Alas, hindsight is always twenty-twenty.

"Do you ever think about me?" Christina queried, gazing up at Ryan with her big blue eyes and plump red lips. Ryan blushed, raising his shoulders in embarrassment. "You're like my best friend. Of course, I think about you," he replied, understanding the underlying meaning.

"I mean, I think about you in more than a friend way," she confessed.

"Oh!" Ryan uttered, unsurprised. *Seriously? That's your response, you moron? Why not just say, "Aw, shucks," while you're at it?*

Taking the lead, Christina swung Ryan's body towards her, locking eyes with him. Amidst Ryan's distracted thoughts about ghosts, he felt her hand press against his cheek, guiding his face towards hers. "Ryan Hatcher! I would make a great girlfriend, and you know it." Sighing, Ryan reached for Christina's hand on his cheek, brought it to his lips, and kissed her knuckles. "I know you would," he agreed.

"Then what is it?" she asked. Ryan saw the confusion in her eyes as he shut his, knowing what would come next could change everything, one way or another. "I'm just scared."

Scott's voice echoed from a distance, interrupting Ryan's and Christina's moment. "Looks like someone got their wish granted," he said. Ryan and Christina looked at each other and began to walk deeper into the woods, where the trees blocked the natural light. Above them, massive amounts of white paper draped over the branches flowed with the wind. Scott raised his hands to show off someone else's handiwork.

Toilet paper blew off the trees onto the ground as Ryan stopped to look at the yolk covering the bark and the broken eggshells at their feet. "Who did this?" Christina asked.

"I'll give ya three guesses, but you'll only need one," Scott answered. Ryan began to walk under the trees, looking up at the toilet paper rolls, finding it oddly relaxing. Starting to walk backward, facing Scott and Christina, Ryan yelled, "Who else could it be? Eric, right? The neighborhood dime store hood. I wonder what it's like being a cliché."

A menacing figure, armed with a knife, materialized behind a massive oak tree, pressing the blade against Ryan's throat. A sinister voice whispered mockingly into his left ear, extinguishing any remnants of bravado. Surrendering, Ryan raised his hands, acutely aware of the foul stench emanating from his captor. The sniveling giggle accompanied the voice confirmed his fear – Eric Flanagan, wielding a threatening switchblade, had him in a deadly grip.

Devin emerged from another hiding spot with a nervous snicker, revealing complicity in his baby brother's torment. Valerie, arms folded in an attempt to shield herself from the cold, stood by, embarrassed by her boyfriend's menacing behavior.

"Hey there, buddy. Not so suave with your words now, are ya?" Eric's voice sneered next to Ryan's left ear as he glided the knife over Ryan's Adam's apple, lifting him off the ground. "Who else could it have been? It's just us," Scott asked his friend. Valerie pleaded for Ryan's release, and Eric silenced her with a menacing threat directed at Scott.

Devin, usually complicit in Eric's antics, grew uneasy, sensing the escalating danger for his little brother. "Come on, man! You scared him enough!" he implored. Eric violently shook his head, insisting Ryan must face consequences for his audacity.

The anxiety heightened as Christina's desperate cries for help further infuriated Eric. In a final, chilling declaration, he ominously proclaimed she

had just made a grave mistake, branding her as an "orphan" about to face the consequences for her audacity.

Tensions surged as Christina defiantly shouted, "Shut up!" rejecting Eric's taunts. His sadistic giggle reverberated, intensifying the verbal assault. Ryan, fueled by anger, couldn't bear to see Christy cry. Memories of her childhood tantrum resurfaced, adding an emotional layer to the already tense situation. In a swift kick to Eric's crotch, Ryan managed to break free, while Scott's giggles only served to escalate the tension.

Amidst Eric's pain, he issued chilling threats about Ryan's mother, promising a grim fate. Devin, blindsided by the revelation of Eric's true nature, unleashed an unprecedented wave of anger. The punch to Eric's face marked a pivotal moment, shattering the bully's misguided self-esteem. The kids formed a tense circle, awaiting Eric's next move, the confrontation reaching a boiling point.

The arrival of parents heightened the urgency of the situation. Eric, clutching pepper spray, menacingly issued threats. Devin, grappling with guilt, extended a hand to help Eric, an undeserved gesture considering his actions. Eric, with a crazed expression, pointed the pepper spray towards Devin, escalating the danger.

The wind intensified, heightening the ominous atmosphere as Eric contemplated his next move. With a sinister smile, he unleashed a burst of pepper spray, targeting Valerie, Devin, Scott, and Christina. Quick on his feet, Ryan dodged the effects, witnessing the painful consequences on his brother and friends.

Amidst the chaos, Eric continued shouting menacing threats, vowing harm to them all. The parents arrived just in time to witness the unfolding mayhem, the situation escalating to a point of no return. The spoken dialogue echoed through the woods, capturing the raw intensity of the moment— "I'll kill all of you!"

Valerie saw something. Dumbfounded, she looked behind her boyfriend, wanting to scream, fear stricken, unable to conjure any rational thought, waiting for words to come from her mouth. A dark presence materialized behind Eric as he threatened the five with one final sentence, "I have everything in this bag to make you all miserable. Do not fuck with—"

A wild animal's head emerged from the darkness; head tilted to grab young Eric Flanagan with its jaw by his sides. Its fangs penetrated his fleshy sides and lower ribs, breaking the bottom bones in half. Blood

spewed from Eric's sides as the beast began throwing his body onto the ground, attempting to incapacitate him as he fought to escape its clenching jaws. A young man's screams echoed through the night sky.

Eric's blood spewed onto Valerie's face and white cat costume. The leaves, above and below, dripped red from their tips as the trunks were soaked from his fluids. Valerie wiped red from her mouth and then looked down at her hands, crying for Eric as the monster violently threw him to the ground, flipping his body about. Eric dug his fingers into the soil to pull himself forward, shrieking as he attempted to escape. The animal took him into its jaws again.

Devin, Scott, and Christy didn't know what was happening as they fought to clear their eyes. They all realized what they were witnessing after the shock began to fade—The Hatchers and Donovans watched an enormous wolf take Eric Flanagan into its mouth.

*You will leave.*

*You allowed the meat sacks to see too much.*

*You will carry this one and pick at its bones.*

*You will take advantage of this last night until I come again.*

The wolf snarled menacingly at the two families, freezing them with fear. Its upper mouth curled, revealing long whiskers pointing toward the ground. Calvin Hatcher positioned himself before the parents, blocking any attempts to move forward with his outstretched arm. The creature momentarily paused, allowing Eric to reach out to Valerie, gasping for air and struggling to scream for help.

No one knew how to react.

It planted its bare, human-like hands and feet into the dirt, preparing for movement. Cold air shot out of its mouth and nose as its yellow eyes, with dilated pupils, scanned the potential threat. Eric lay limp in its mouth, gasping for breath. Rebecca Hatcher reached out to Devin, hoping to get his attention as she stepped toward Ryan and Calvin. Devin remained oblivious, helplessly watching Eric's gruesome fate, while Ryan fixated on the wolf's eyes. Despite its intimidating appearance, Ryan sensed a hint of sadness in those eyes during a brief moment of relaxation—

*This isn't an ordinary wolf. There's something vulnerable, something human about it.*

Fascination replaced fear for Ryan. The wolf locked eyes with him, conveying a secret it wished to keep hidden from humans. Growling, it

swiftly disappeared into the wilderness, carrying Eric Flanagan in its mouth.

Shocked and terrified, everyone remained frozen as the three affected kids rubbed their eyes, trying to alleviate the stinging sensation. "What the hell do we do now?" Rick Donovan yelled. Valerie, traumatized by the horrific scene, clawed at her skin to remove drying blood, screaming Eric's name into the dark forest. She sprinted after them in a desperate attempt to save his life. Devin's vision cleared, and he watched Valerie run away, shouting, "No! Valerie!"

Calvin, realizing he had a gun tucked in the back of his pants, retrieved it. He wasn't the only one armed. "We need to help him," Calvin declared. A panicked Rebecca, putting her arm on her husband, argued, "You saw what just happened, Cal! There's no way that boy is still breathing."

"I have to go after it, Becs! Or more will get hurt!" he explained, ready to plunge into the darkness. Rebecca, unwilling to permit Calvin to risk his life, knew he'd try to be the hero. Rick Donovan drew his gun from his leather holster and instructed Silvia to take the kids back to the Hatcher's house. Eager to join the pursuit, Rick ran after Calvin, attempting to catch up despite his bulky figure.

Ryan began to walk back with his brother and friends, but he noticed his mother wasn't with them. Halting, he watched his mother, torn between following her husband and staying behind. Rebecca turned her head toward her wide-eyed son, conveying a silent apology. She didn't need to say it; her expression spoke volumes. "Mom?" Ryan called out, and without a word, Rebecca ran into the night, disappearing into the distance. Ryan chased after his mom, knowing he couldn't let her face the danger alone.

Devin and the group had covered a significant distance, reaching the halfway point back, when he noticed his little brother was no longer trailing behind them. Despite the responsibility of looking after the younger kids weighing on him, the urge to assist his parents and Valerie surged within him. From her bedroom window, Layla observed as her brother returned without the rest of the family. They trudged through the yard and ascended the patio steps into the kitchen, where she eagerly waited to hear from her oldest brother about the others' whereabouts. Locking eyes with his sister, Devin felt reassured he'd made the correct choice to stay behind. He couldn't bear to contemplate the worst possible outcome of his parents and brother confronting a violent animal. In the event of a tragic ending, he was

the only one left to care for Layla. Unable to venture back into the woods himself, Devin knew of someone nearby who could help.

Rebecca's voice cut through the night, her shouts for her husband to be cautious echoing in the darkness. Ryan hurried toward the chaos, stumbling along the way. The trees intensified the darkness, obscuring the sky and any available light, forcing Ryan to rely on his memory of previous excursions through the woods.

The voices ceased, prompting Ryan to slow and strain his ears for any hints of movement. Shuffling sounds emanated from the right, opposite to his intended direction. "Tell me where you are, Mom!" Ryan pleaded into the night.

A loud bark erupted from the area where leaves had shuffled, followed by growls. "Let him go, you son of a bitch!" Ryan heard his father's distant yell, near where he believed the cornfields began.

Multiple taunts and screams echoed simultaneously. Fearful and unable to distinguish between yells of pain or terror, Ryan approached the edge of the woods. Peering through the branches, he witnessed his parents, Rick, and Valerie surrounding a creature on its hind legs, towering over them.

Ryan's heartbeat reverberated through his ears as he watched the unnatural creature loom over his friends and family, poised to strike without hesitation. The werewolf, standing at least three feet taller than them, no longer held Eric between its jaws. Instead he lay convulsing on the ground before it, pouring blood.

The cornfield, abandoned for the next couple of seasons, provided a backdrop begging to brown and crumble. The crunching remnants of dying corn stalks could alert the farmers who owned the land. Anonymity held no importance now, with a life hanging in the balance.

The werewolf swiped at Calvin and Rick, the closest to it, with long fingers and sharp, jagged claws. Calvin and Rick pointed their guns at it, disbelief etched across their faces. Squinting from the edge of the woods, Ryan thought the wolf's body lacked fur and appeared unnaturally thin, as if it hadn't eaten in weeks.

Advancing towards Valerie, the werewolf swiped again, causing her to tumble to the ground. Rick yelled for it to focus on him and leave his daughter alone. Ryan couldn't discern if the wolf had harmed Valerie. A single gunshot from her father rang out in retaliation, ensuring it wasn't going anywhere. The wolf yelped, kneeling on one leg and using its hands



to support itself. Ryan was mesmerized—it appeared to be a wolf but moved like a human on two feet.

*You fool! You stopped! You have no respect for our life!*

*You never did.*

*You will die tonight.*

*You will never know how much better it is.*

.....*So be it*, the exhausted man within the mongrel exhaled. *That's what I have wanted all along.*

"Clear a path, boy!" a man demanded, storming past Ryan near the edge of the woods, forcefully pushing through branches into the field. It was their neighbor, Melvin Craggs, armed with a shotgun cradled in his arms. Two more gunshots echoed, one from Calvin and the other from Rick. The werewolf proved to be a formidable opponent, tough to kill. As it moved from the humans defending the Flanagan boy, each bullet piercing its flesh lessened the sound of its dying howls. It whined like a wounded canine, begging for mercy. Yet, it wasn't the animal pleading but the man underneath, asking for forgiveness.

Knowing the beast wouldn't escape, they all proceeded closer, studying it. Its sparse hair receded into its body. Melvin walked next to Calvin, grabbing his shoulder to halt his advance. Placing the end of his shotgun against the creature's forehead, the wolf let out one last yowl towards the moon, acknowledging its fate.

As Melvin guided its nose and mouth upward with his shotgun, an uncanny alteration occurred. The creature's face shifted, resembling a man. "Thank you," the man whispered with his canine mouth. Melvin hesitated, observing the human side but knowing everything about it was unnatural. The body convulsed, reacting to the metal inside, the mouth quivering in fear of losing life but understanding it was better if it did. The man, now naked, looked up at Melvin Craggs and nodded, accepting what would happen next. The shotgun blast echoed through the field, scaring away dawdling crows.

Calvin provided his coat for the second time that night, placing it on Rebecca's shoulders. She had taken it off to move away easier, thinking it was a large dog. Rebecca rested her head on her husband's shoulder, holding her arm and wincing from the pain in her abdomen. She had been foolish to play the hero, not knowing any better and instinctively helping. A part of her thought she could go out as a hero as a substitute to the cancer

taking her. Rebecca heard a rustling behind her, turning her head to see their youngest boy coming toward them. Ryan noticed the scratches on his father's arm as he held his wife, doubled over in pain.

The tragedy unfolded as they realized the man had been living a cursed existence. His silent plea for forgiveness and gratitude before the fatal shot spoke volumes about the torment he had endured. The once human eyes revealed a tragic story of a life marred by the beast within, yearning for release from a curse turning him into a monster against his will.

*Did that thing do that to my dad? It doesn't look too deep, but he should go to the hospital just in case. Maybe the wolf had, like, rabies or something.* "Mom? Dad?"

The lifeless body of the wolf came into Ryan's sight. Naked and twitching, its mouth and nose obliterated by Cragg's shotgun blast. It wasn't a wolf or a large dog; it was a dead, pale man lying in the middle of the cornfield. Long, dark hair sparsely covered his head. Ryan recalled the condition—*alopecia*—a boy in his school had it.

The group circled around Eric Flanagan's twitching body, clad in shredded clothes, nearly naked in the cornfield. Tears streamed from the sides of his eyes as he gazed up at those he had vexed and threatened only moments ago. Ryan stood at a distance, convinced Eric Flanagan was on the brink of death.

"No, no, my love! You shouldn't see this!" Rebecca yelled, placing her arm on his back and turning Ryan around to shield him from the scene. Confusion laced his voice as he demanded answers. "What the hell was that?" he questioned. "Nothing you need to bother yourself with," his mother sternly replied, cringing. Calvin turned toward Ryan, noticing his son's inquiries. It didn't concern Ryan his father had three bleeding scratches down his right forearm; his focus was on the lifeless man on the ground.

"You went after a wolf. I saw it! That wasn't an animal!"

Rebecca urgently put her finger to her lips, attempting to silence Ryan's questioning. Unleashing a barrage of inquiries about what had transpired and the safety of everyone, Ryan was met with his mother's hiss. "Listen to me, boy! Best you forget about this tonight as best you can. I'm going to."

"But!" Ryan interjected.

"No! Shut your mouth!"

Ryan's posture deflated, and he relinquished his will to persist with the questions, understanding he wouldn't prevail against his mom. "We need to take care of this. Take Valerie and go back to the house, and don't say anything about what you saw. Don't need the town thinkin' I'm raisin' a loon." Ryan lowered his brow, comprehending his mother's insinuation.

"No one will believe this. We have to make sure no questions are asked. Do you understand?" Ryan nodded and walked away, confused and disappointed in the woman who should stand for truth. But this—*this is different*.

He comprehended what the parents had to undertake now, yet he disliked that it fell upon them. The day would come when he'd seek answers, but not in the immediate future. Ryan never fully grasped the term "ignorance is bliss." After tonight, he would have given anything to rewind time and refrain from pursuing the creature into the field.

Valerie, trembling with the winds of the frigid night, walked alongside Ryan on their way back to his house, where Devin and the others anxiously waited. The journey felt long and arduous, and in the silence, both grappled with the surreal events of the night. How could they ever convey the tale of Halloween night in 1988 to anyone? Ryan glanced at Valerie, noticing a slight bleed on her leg from the cuts on her leggings.

When she saw Devin lingering outside the house, tears welled up, Valerie rushed over to him, embracing him tightly while sobbing into his shoulder. This moment had occupied Devin's thoughts for years—what her embrace would be like—but reality differed from his envisioned dream-like scenario. Ryan observed Valerie weeping in his brother's arms, anticipating her revelation to Devin their best friend was likely dead.

"I'm fine! Thanks for asking," Ryan remarked sarcastically, attempting to inject some humor, but the atmosphere remained awkward. The day had wearied him, and he grappled with the proximity of death – his mother, Eric, and now the unfortunate man with his face blown off. *What in the world is happening?* Christina approached him, uncertain of what to do or say. Ryan aspired to be the stalwart one, someone with composure, but one glance at her, and he couldn't hold back the tears. He had suppressed the grief over his mother's illness, but this was the breaking point. *That poor man had died, Eric likely too, and soon my mom will. Will it be as agonizing for her as it was for them?* He rested his head lightly against Christina's shoulder, near her neck, and neither uttered a word.

They all returned to the Hatcher house where Valerie's mother stood, awaiting her daughter's return. Silvia invited her into her arms, and Valerie accepted. She notified her mother that Rick was okay when she left but didn't mention the man who died from multiple gunshot wounds. *Did she not see it?*

Ryan left the kitchen, observing Valerie babbling on, her costume torn in multiple places. He didn't understand and wasn't sure if he ever would. Limping down the hall to his room, he realized he twisted his ankle when he fell struggling to find his parents. Scott emerged from the kitchen, looked at Ryan, and asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

It was hard for Scott to be serious, but this was a unique circumstance. He knew his friend returned differently than when they started the night. Ryan chuckled at his friend's costume and said, "I'm dying," reversing the dialogue from the characters they dressed up as each other.

"You're not dying. You just can't think of anything better to do," Scott replied, now playing the part of Ferris. "I feel like complete shit, man. I'm going to just go to bed," Ryan finished. Scott nodded and walked back to the kitchen, where Valerie continued recounting the unsettling events.

Passing his little sister's room, Ryan stopped to look at Layla gazing out the window. Knowing her brother was watching her, Layla turned her head and said, "You just had to go into the woods, didn't you?" Unwilling to partake in his sister's "told-ya-so" game, Ryan faced the end of the hall and began to walk, "Yeah. I suppose you were right."

"It wasn't my idea to tell you not to. It was theirs."

Ryan halted and backtracked to Layla's room, poking his head in, confused. He asked, "What? Whose?" Layla pointed to her lit Lite-Brite board, displaying a colorful picture of their backyard with five stick figures standing in the grass next to the woods. "There were four of them a couple of days ago, but now there are five. They are perfectly lovely if you ever get to see them. They mean well, even if they don't look like it," Layla explained. Ryan approached the nightstand with the lit picture and stared at it. Unable to deal with invisible people in her sister's mind, Ryan walked away, accompanied by his shadow, the Lite-Brite created when he walked in. He admitted to himself, *I don't think it's just her*. "Hey, Ryan?" Layla yelled before he made it to his bedroom.

"Did you see a cat outside?"

THE  
HUNTERS  
MOON



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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# THIS CHARMING MAN

*Everything has changed, but everyone looks the same. Like nothing happened.*

The tone had shifted.

The holidays were drawing near, and Layla took it upon herself to replace the cardboard decorations from Halloween with Thanksgiving themed ones she made at school. The Hatcher family had a yearly tradition of taping these school made decorations onto the windows. It was the usual set – Devin and Ryan had crafted the same ones in the past: a crayon-colored cornucopia and a brown turkey with cardboard feathers connected to its end by a clip, accompanied by pilgrim hats. The Jack-o-lantern was removed from the doorstep, and the moveable skeleton hanging on the front door was taken down.

Two weeks had passed since the Halloween monster attack. Everyone seemed to have moved on, never discussing the unsettling event. Ryan couldn't comprehend why no one wanted to talk about it. His closest circle—Devin, Scott, and Christina—were oblivious to what he witnessed that night. He repeatedly contemplated if silence was the best solution.

Devin reveled in the aftermath, soaking in the attention Valerie gave him. Unfortunately, the focus was on Eric and his condition at Akron General and the night of the incident. Ryan wasn't sure if Valerie had disclosed the whole truth to his brother or if she omitted certain parts to avoid sounding mad. Regardless, Ryan figured Devin wouldn't mind as he enjoyed the attention and friendly affection. Christina's attitude towards Ryan, however, remained wishy-washy.

On some days, she clung to Ryan's side at every opportunity, much to his annoyance. On others, she seemed distant. Ryan often pondered how their conversation might have unfolded if it weren't for the interrupted by the subsequent terror. *Would we have become a couple? Would I have just wanted to be friends?* All Ryan knew was the days when Christina avoided him were more challenging than when she annoyed him.

His best friend, Scott, appeared unaffected by the attack. Scott wasn't oblivious; he understood what happened with the wolf a couple of weeks



ago wasn't natural. Yet, he chose silence, treating it like a delusion rather than reality. Scott sensed something was troubling both his friend and his sister. He knew Ryan was keeping something from him.

And he was.

Ryan was aware Scott might not believe him and avoided him when he felt questioning may happen.

Even more peculiar were the interactions among the sets of parents who witnessed the incident firsthand. They now engaged in more frequent conversations, like when Calvin and Rick collaborated. Even Ryan's parents were getting along again, although Calvin still rented a small apartment in Akron, far from his family. Ryan no longer cared if his father ever returned home because the clock was ticking for his mother now—his primary concern. He had become numb to everything else around him, consumed by thoughts of Halloween night.

*Who was that man? What happened to the body? Was there even a man? I can't be the only one who saw the wolf's size. Why is no one talking about this?* Ryan remained quiet, keeping a hidden secret in his eyes he didn't want anyone to know.

Layla was a different story.

She had always been slightly different from other kids her age, which kept her feeling isolated. It never troubled her as it meant more time to work on acquiring good grades. Layla found solace in the comfort of her stuffed animals, playing the roles of both mother and doctor to them as if they were alive. Since the end of October, Layla had moved on from playing with dolls to obsessing over her Lite-Brite set. She requested more blank pages from the store to create brightly lit artworks, often attempting to soften her words as she spoke to invisible persons.

Calvin and Rebecca weren't entirely concerned about this recent change in their daughter's behavior, attributing it to Layla just being herself and marching to the beat of her own drum. While they took no issue with the idea of their daughter talking to the air, Ryan remained on edge.

Ryan had seen the shadow at the end of the hall, which terrified him in the nights prior. He witnessed the apparition reenacting its death without any context about who or what caused it, unknowingly reaching for a bloodied dress shoe with the leg attached in the woods. As timid as he usually was, Ryan Hatcher was confident he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He stayed up at night in his bed, refusing to leave. Some nights,

he held his urine when he needed to relieve himself, eventually soiling his underwear and pajamas—a *small price for safety*.

It was Friday, November 17th, marking two weeks since the recent wolf attacks. Yet, there were no news reports, radio broadcasts, or missing person bulletins regarding the man who perished in the cornfield. No murmurs circulated among homemakers, sharing gossip with their husbands about the mysterious events of Halloween night. The silence seemed too coordinated, too calculated. For Ryan, the absence of any evidence only pointed to one conclusion—the adults disposed of the body and moved on without a second glance.

“When your mom bakes a cake, how does she know it’s done? What kind of cake do you enjoy? And how about the frosting?” Colin delved into another round of questioning as soon as he settled beside Ryan on the bus. The duo, arriving late from hanging one of the banners for Norton’s Fall Festival as a consequence for talking during class, recognized one of them had to sit with Colin due to the lack of empty seats. Ryan volunteered, never growing tired of Colin’s curiosity the way others might have, attributing it to a lack of friends.

“She uses a toothpick to check if the insides are cooked through. I like lemon flavored cake with white icing. Why?” Ryan replied.

“I’m trying to decide what kind of cake I want to make for my birthday party tomorrow.” *Oh, shit! That’s tomorrow! I totally forgot.*

“Why do you have to make the cake? I thought someone else does it for the person’s birthday.” Colin shrugged with a crooked smile and said, “I just want to do it myself. I want to practice in case I need to make something one day.”

Ryan nodded and simply replied, “Cool.” It was as good of an answer as any. He couldn’t fault someone for trying to improve, but Ryan had no desire to go to Colin’s house to eat anything. *What if no one else shows? Then it will be a lame time and take forever to get through.* He felt terrible thinking this way, but probably a mix of anxiety, depression, or both made him think pessimistically.

The school bus halted in front of Colin’s house, and the same number of kids walked to it as usual. Ryan still wondered, *why so many kids? Did his mom agree to babysit them while the other parents worked?* “See you tomorrow, Ryan. The thing starts at eleven o’clock,” Colin informed as he walked down the aisle.

“In the morning!” Ryan questioned, slightly joking. Colin laughed as he made his way down the steps and off the bus. *Dammit! That means I’ll have to get up earlier. I have to find a way out of this.* Ryan had become the night owl and the late riser on the weekends.

Christina crept her way up to Ryan’s seat. She sat next to him at the bus driver’s behest, who wanted everyone to stay in the seats where they originally sat. “That’s the last time, Miss White,” the driver told Christina. “Sure thing!” Christina grinned, flattening her hand against the back of the brown vinyl seat in front of her, middle finger out, hiding the gesture.

Ryan chuckled at Christina’s sarcasm, which didn’t often happen. He enjoyed Christina making such a lewd gesture towards the driver because she was so timid most of the time. *That’s the first time I’ve seen her do that,* he realized. “So...you’re mad at me,” Christina proclaimed, tired of beating around the bush to discover what kept Ryan so distant.

“What? No I’m not.”

Christina took a breath, relieved it wasn’t her. She had become afraid admitting her feelings toward him would drive him away, and nothing was further from the truth. “Will you tell me what’s up then?” she wondered. Ryan slid down the seat, placing his knees against the seat in front and shaking his head. Christina always knew Ryan to be a shy person, but not like this.

Gliding down to his level, Christina kept on him. “You know I’m just going to keep bugging you until you let me in a little.” Ryan sighed and whispered, “Maybe when we get off the bus. But we have to be quiet. I don’t want Layla to know anything or scare her.” Over the last week, witnessing his sister’s behavior, Ryan was sure the ghosts giving Layla so much joy were the beings terrifying him.

The bus halted at the usual spot, and the kids ensured no cars disregarded the blinking stop sign. Ryan gently placed his hand on Layla’s shoulder, preventing her from venturing into the road. Layla admired her brother’s protective nature, unaware he couldn’t shield her from the unsettling entities she saw—the girl, the tracksuit man, and the figure with dress shoes. The weight of the situation bothered Ryan deeply.

“What’s bothering you?” Scott appeared beside Ryan as they walked towards Greengate Drive.

“I’ve been asking the same thing,” Christina chimed in. “Moody McGee over here is being stubborn.” Christina teased Ryan but expressed genuine

concern.

"He's been a little bit of... what does mom call it? Oh yeah! He's been in a wee bit of a snit," Layla added, skipping down the road in her brown corduroy pants and red cardigan, her brown ponytail bouncing.

"Shut it, dingleberry!" Ryan shouted, attempting to stifle his laughter. They continued walking, with Scott turning right to reach his house, while the rest shifted left. "Hang out this weekend?" Scott asked.

"Probably. I have a thing I need to go to tomorrow for a little while," Ryan replied.

"Just call when you're ready," Scott instructed. They waved goodbye, and after a few steps, Christina slipped her hand into Ryan's jean jacket pocket, intertwining her fingers with his.

The day was brisk but sunny. As winter approached, the days grew shorter, and seizing every moment in the sunlight became essential. The winter season, while picturesque, often brought a slight depression due to the lack of light. Ryan's mom, Rebecca, accustomed to such conditions in the United Kingdom, was unfazed, but Ryan struggled, missing his friends.

"Do you think we could hang out more this winter than we usually do?" Ryan asked.

Christina's eyes widened, entertaining thoughts of potential romantic scenarios—sipping hot chocolate together, watching movies, or engaging in a snowball fight that might lead to something more. "Yeah!" she squealed, elated before composing herself, "I mean, sure. That sounds cool."

As Layla ran towards the house, Ryan saw an opportunity to be more candid with Christina. "I want to tell you. I do. It's just—I'm not even sure what the problem is. Even if I did, I'm sure it's not something you'll understand," Ryan explained, avoiding eye contact with Christina.

"You don't know that!" she insisted. She wasn't going to win against Ryan, not right now. All Christy could do was be patient with her longtime friend. "I'll be around next week until Wednesday. We're leaving for South Carolina."

"What's in South Carolina?" Ryan asked.

"An uncle of my mom's side, the Greene's. My cousin Allen is there. He's pretty cool. Obnoxious sometimes, but cool."

Ryan was glad Christy was getting out of dodge for a while. He wished he was leaving to see or have family coming to see him. "That's good. You should see your family more." Christina smiled. Seeing a spark of positivity

coming from Ryan made her feel better. She slid her hand out from Ryan's pocket, ready to walk down to her house, but he didn't let go. Instead, in an act out of the norm for Ryan, he pulled her closer, putting his arm around her. It wasn't the first time they hugged, but it was the first time he came in for one. Ryan Hatcher put his arms around Christina White's waist rather than under her arms. Taken back, Christy breathed in, holding her breath as Ryan put his head on her shoulder. She pressed her lips together, blowing out frigid air lightly and slowly, loving everything happening.

Breathing in through his nose, Ryan caught the smell of Christina's hair. He had never paid attention before, but it was soothing, lavender with a hint of vanilla. "Is this okay?" Ryan's voice cracked. "Yeah. It's good—new. What's gotten into you?" Christy asked. Ryan sighed and decided to say something to her. *Hopefully, it means something.*

"You did. You got into my head—in the best way. I'm not good at explaining."

Christina smiled, knowing what he meant, holding her lips and attempting to hold back her delight. She had forgotten how long she wanted to hear something like that from someone—*anyone*. "Well," she trembled, "I think that is just the best." Realizing what she had just said, she shuttered, wondering why her love drunk self stumbled to find better words.

They pulled from one another, happy yet nervous. The wind caught Christina's blonde hair, blowing it into her face in front of her smile. Ryan smiled crookedly, embarrassed he finally told her something true, cheesy maybe, but it was what was inside him for a long time. They awkwardly said goodbye to one another and went their separate ways with a skip in their step now. Christina looked back to see if Ryan watched her, but he didn't. If she looked a moment longer, she would have seen him look her way.

Ryan walked down the driveway, finding his father's car in the garage instead of on the road outside like usual. *That's strange. He doesn't see us until tomorrow morning.* He became concerned something had happened—maybe his mother was in trouble, or worse. His first instinct was to race inside to see what was going on until a funny little giggle came from the other side of the house.

A large flock of blackbirds flew above, circling the yard, occasionally landing on the grass to peck for food. The number above made the sky look black as Ryan moved to the grass to find Layla laughing hysterically,

running across the yard, tapping the air. Watching Layla run, cackling like a madwoman, he noted she would stop, tap the air again, and run; she repeated three more times until she yelled out, “Goose!”

She ran toward the patio stairs and then made a sharp right towards the large tree where their father put up a swing for them to play on. Layla stopped and looked around, disappointed. “That’s not fair!... Okay, fine. You can be it now, I guess.”

Ryan glanced at the number of birds again—more had joined the flock. He ran across the yard, hollering for Layla to come inside. The birds cawed, circling lower to the ground than before. Layla landed in Ryan’s arms, laughing at what Ryan couldn’t see. He dragged her petite body back across the grass and onto the driveway next to the garage. Layla didn’t understand her brother was worried, and the sudden murder of crows appearing wasn’t a game to him. Ryan let go of his sister, who tried to dash towards the yard again. “No!” Ryan yelled. “Can’t you see the birds?”

She remained still as they watched the flock land on their grass, cawing and pecking. Ryan pulled her towards the patio stairs for precaution's sake. They both walked up backward, watching for invisible beings possibly following them. Ryan couldn't resist the allure of gazing down at his yard from a vantage point above. “Whoa!” an amazed Layla said, looking down from the patio to find a blanket of blackbirds covering the green—except for five bare spots.

The birds didn’t venture near those areas as if something was already occupying the space. Ryan stared at the patches of green through the shimmying black. *Caw!* The birds in front of the spots moved away as the bare, grassy areas slowly shifted forward. The faster the five areas moved, the more agitated the birds became, tapping at something Ryan couldn’t see. Whatever they were, they were moving closer.

“They just want to be seen,” Layla explained, knowing Ryan did not understand. “That’s all.”

The birds leapt around whatever they were came their way until the five green spots in a sea of blackbirds converged, forming a large circle of grass. Whatever presences lingered around and inside the house wanted to be known. Layla looked at them as people visiting, but Ryan saw the darkness surrounding them. These people died horrendously, and the more paranormal activity he witnessed, the more he understood. Still, Layla was the only one who could see them consistently. It was easier for her.

Everyone believes in something otherworldly when young, monster under the bed or in the closet, the Boogie Man even. The innocence of a child makes it easier to accept the unexplainable. When you grow up, logic takes over, and people stop believing.

Blackbirds continued moving around, avoiding the invisible beings until the large spot of grass disappeared into the walkway leading to the patio. Layla and Ryan listened to the wooden stairs their dad had built two years prior begin to creak. They were coming up the stairs towards them, and Ryan didn't want anything to do with it. Grabbing Layla by the hand, Ryan ran to the sliding glass door and pulled on the handle—*locked! Dammit!*

Rebecca leaned against the counter, talking to someone, probably Devin if Ryan had to guess. Ryan began to knock on the glass to get their mother to let them in. She looked over and put her finger up, telling them to wait a moment.

*What the hell is she doing?*

Footsteps pressing on loose boards became louder as the handrail vibrated, quivering with every step they took. *Were they using the handle to walk up?* Ryan peered into the kitchen and began to bang on the window with his fist. There was no one in sight now as the footsteps stopped behind them. Continuing to slam his fist on the glass, Ryan looked behind, seeing and hearing nothing. They were either gone or right behind them, waiting to make a move. Grabbing Ryan's side, Layla became concerned.

"They don't look right, Ryan. They look bad again," she told him.

It became silent.

The blackbirds ceased squawking, and the wind was still. *Are they gone?* Ryan lightly tapped on the glass again with closed eyes, hoping someone would unlock it. He opened one eye and turned to see everything on the patio looked like it always did. The patio furniture was in its place, the hung plants their mother never watered, and the grill sitting next to the patio stairs.

Metal scraped against wood, creating a clanging sound, startling Ryan and Layla. Something indignantly pushed the grill from the stair. The apparitions were angry. Ryan turned towards the glass and saw five rotting corpses in the reflection, watching the siblings who were silently praying for rescue. *Are there five of them now?*

The dead surrounded them. One shifted their jaws until it fell to the patio floor. The girl in the dress began to comb her red hair with the

fingernails on the three fingers remaining on her right hand until strands tore from her skull, followed by large chunks of flesh. A well-dressed man held his head onto his neck because the shredded front neck skin wouldn't keep in place much longer. A young boy stood with a gaping mouth pointed to the sky, moaning as his eyes rolled back into his head, allowing blood to continuously flow from his groin. Another boy with a letterman's jacket cried, begging for help as he fought to keep blood and intestines from falling from his abdomen, pulling them back in. The only entity of the five Ryan recognized was the man in the jogging suit, still fighting to keep his throat from being torn apart by an animal. *The same animal I saw? The werewolf?* He bit down on his bottom lip and clutched his sister's tiny hand as he closed his eyes, fighting the urge to scream. A whooshing sound alerted Ryan as warm air overcame him and Layla. He opened his eyes and saw his mother's face, who had finally come to open the door. Pulling Layla along with him, Ryan fell onto the kitchen floor. "Close the door!"

Rebecca knelt to help her children onto her feet. "Was it so damn hard to open the door when we knocked? We were standing right there!" Ryan screamed at his mother; his voice raised for the first time since her diagnosis. "Watch yo' tongue with me, boy!" Rebecca scowled.

"Watch your mouth!" another voice sternly said. Ryan turned his head to the left to find his father, Calvin, leaning against the counter near the white cookie jar with the blue flower painted. *What the hell is he doing here?* His father looked different, clean shaven, and more svelte than before.

"There's something wrong with this place," Ryan told them, clenching his teeth. His parents exchanged glances as Layla stealthily walked to her room, distancing herself from everything. "What do you mean?" Calvin asked. Ryan pointed outside and began to speak, realizing discussing the activity he believed was happening would do no good. *Fuck it.*

"Something or things are hanging around this house. I don't know why. And I think Layla sees these people too. Do you not see it? Can't you feel it around like a...heavy brick on your chest?" Ryan explained.

"Your sister just likes to play make believe. That's all!" Rebecca's mouth quivered.

Already fed up with the conversation going nowhere, Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "You know what? Never mind. I don't have the



patience to convince both of you about this.” He walked away, feeling defeated once again.

“We got Pizza Hut coming,” his dad told him. “I’m going to stay and eat with all of you tonight if it’s cool.”

“I’m not the one who wouldn’t be cool with it,” Ryan replied, referring to his brother. Ryan made his way to his room to pass out until dinner arrived later, not questioning why his father was sticking around longer than usual.

It was a little after six o’clock when Ryan woke up. He’d been asleep for about two hours and felt more refreshed than after a whole night’s sleep most mornings. Honestly, Ryan forgot what eight hours of sleep felt like, but it was a new goal if it felt anything like the two-hour nap. He would have slept longer if the gurgling of an empty stomach hadn’t woken him.

The aroma of sausage and pepperoni pizza wafted into Ryan’s bedroom, reminiscent of a cartoon pie’s illustrated aroma. It figuratively lifted him off the bed as he floated down the hall. Pizza was ready for him to eat, but he preferred visiting The Hut. There was something special about drinking from their red plastic cups, ordering a pitcher of Pepsi, and playing Ms. Pac-Man on the flat screen table near the restaurant’s front. Hell, if he read enough books, Ryan could get a free personal pan pizza through the Book-It! Program schools partook in.

Devin sat on the couch in the family room across from the kitchen, moping as teenagers do, unaware of Ryan looking at him. Ryan shifted his body towards the kitchen entrance and saw Layla and his father, Calvin, diving into the thin crust pepperoni his mon requested. She wouldn’t eat much because of her stomach, but Rebecca was a trooper and tried to eat to keep her strength up.

Hunched over, Calvin began eating his slice of pizza off a paper plate. Ryan stopped, shocked at what he was witnessing. This person before him was another version of his father, one Ryan hadn’t seen for a long time. He was thinner, and his hair grew. Calvin was not skinny but built around his arms and chest, on his way to becoming more svelte. His father styled his hair again as he used to years ago; *he doesn’t style his hair! He just wore it however it looked after running a comb through it.*

Confused, Ryan took a step forward, staring at his dad. “Feeling better, champ?” *Champ? He’s never said champ before.* He saw his father a week

prior, and he looked nothing like he did now, at least not to Ryan's recollection. "Dad? What have you been doing?" Ryan asked.

"Doesn't he look so good? I'm so proud of him," his mother intervened. Devin walked in behind Ryan and looked at his father, not in amazement like his mom and Layla were, but disdainful.

"Wow. Pizza. I hope you didn't go to too much trouble to bring us the magnificent feast set before us," Ryan said with sarcasm. Calvin cut his eyes at Devin and decided to take the high road. "There's also a sausage over on the counter if you want it."

Frowning on his way to get a slice of pizza, Devin avoided the rest and began eating at the counter. He had an uneasy feeling where this havin' dinner together crap was heading. Their mother was happier than she had been in a long time.

"Oh no, you don't Dev. Eat at the table with the rest of us and stuff your gob. We need to talk," Rebecca politely demanded. Devin moped over to the table, letting out a gruff sigh.

*Why is nobody asking questions*, Ryan wondered. This immediate change of appearance and attitude doesn't just happen in a short time. Ryan was still a kid, but he knew a lot.

Calvin took Rebecca's hand and began to speak to his kids. "So we have a little announcement." Rebecca looked over at him and smiled. "Do you want to tell them, Becs?" Rebecca giggled and answered, "That's okay. You can, love."

"You can! I know you want to," Cal replied.

This exchange went back and forth for about another thirty seconds, making Ryan and Devin nauseous with all *the lovey-dovey crap*. "Sweet Jesus! Can you two get on with it then?" an irritated Devin shouted.

"A'ight then! Get your underwear outta ya bum," Rebecca hissed in a thick accent, annoyed Devin who selfishly attempted to take such a great moment away. Rebecca breathed in and smiled again at the rest of her children. "So after some discussion, your father and I thought it would be best if he moved back in."

Layla's eyes lit up. "Yay!" she clapped, hopping out from her seat and hugging her daddy. Layla was so excited they would all be a family again. "This is such good news!" she squealed. Like most things, the high-pitched noise bothered Devin, making him wrinkle his nose. With his eyelids closed tight, Devin jokingly asked, "Layla. Please don't do that. I think only dogs

could hear you,” hoping he wouldn’t hurt her feelings. Rebecca laughed as he removed her fingers from her ears, shaking away the ringing.

“Why?” Ryan candidly asked. “I mean, like, why now?” Calvin and Rebecca glanced at one another, silently asking who should speak first. Rebecca nodded her head, telling her husband to go ahead.

“Well,” Calvin began, “The short answer is that we think it’s time for us to be together as a family. With your mother going through what she is and how it may be affecting you kids...well...I think some things need mending and trying to move on and be better. We haven’t dealt with the news about your mom so well. I love your good ‘ol mom, and I don’t want her to be alone...I want to be around her and all of you. I made a mistake and made it about me and how I couldn’t deal with it, but I’m trying to now. After months of thinking about things, I realized I would rather have more bad days with all of you around than one day of just existing without you.”

A noise came from the end of the dinner table. Calvin looked up to find Devin slow clapping with a look that could kill. “Bravo. I mean, seriously, if I had an Oscar in front of me, I would give it to you for the powerful performance you just gave. I’m sure plenty of people would buy it.”

Rebecca wanted to come across the table and smack Devin across the face for such disrespect toward his father. She could have because a mother’s rage knows no bounds. “That’s enough out of you, cheeky little shit!” Devin never bought into the saying one should respect their elders. He thought it worked both ways, and watching his parents fight one night a few months back made him lose all respect for his dad.

“I swear to Christ, Devin,” his mother hissed. Devin threw his arms in the air, “What? Please tell me, what is going to make everything better?” Rebecca put her hands on her forehead, tired of talking to her stubborn son.

“It’s fine,” Calvin assured his wife. “It’s a valid question even if there was another way of going about it.” Devin and Ryan sat and waited for their father to gather his thoughts. Calvin didn’t know how his boys would take what he was about to say; they were protective of their mother. He figured Ryan would be the more understanding of the two.

“So, I’m on vacation until the beginning of January. I had some time saved up and thought of all the times to be home, now would be it. I haven’t had any alcohol since around Halloween. I’ve been working out more, trying to watch what I eat. Since October, I’ve had this jolt of energy during the day giving me a drive in a way I have never known before. I know this

doesn't make sense because of the suddenness, but I hope you can help me along the way."

Both Ryan and Devin looked away, lost in their thoughts about what their father had just revealed. Devin, ever the pessimist, staunchly refused to believe people his father's age and older could undergo such a complete change. Unbeknownst to the other children, Calvin treated Devin differently, acting as if he needed to teach him about the harsh realities of life. This often involved berating him about his grades, his choice of friends, and insulting his interests. Devin began shaking his head, clenching his jaw tight to keep the peace. "Doesn't really matter. I have no say in this. I just hope you're right in thinking everything will be hunky-dory one day, Mom," he finally spoke after minutes of contemplation.

Ryan was deep in his thoughts, skeptical of the possible changes his father spoke of. It wasn't that he didn't believe his dad could improve, but it was the blatant lies about his physical appearance irking him. *No one changes so drastically in just two weeks. Do they?*

Calvin wore a white thermal shirt with the sleeves rolled up and jeans. Ryan scrutinized his father's arms, the hair as black as on his head, noticing the scratches on his arm had disappeared. It had been a couple of weeks now, so it wasn't unheard of they would heal already, but there was one thing bothering Ryan. "The scratches you had on your arm, what caused them?" Calvin looked down at his arm, aware of what his son was referring to. "Nothing big. I just tripped and landed in a thorn bush. That's all."

They stared at each other until Ryan nodded his head and forced a smile, "Just wonderin'." The conversation about their restored living arrangement had ended, and everyone began to devour their pizza. Devin, Layla, and their father shoveled melted cheese and processed meat into their faces. Even their mother seemed to have a decent appetite, consuming the food with more significant bites than usual but at a slower pace.

Ryan sat back, observing his family devour their food like wild animals. All the noise in the air had faded away as chewing, swallowing, and slurping mouth noises began to echo in his head. He looked over at his family members, fixating on their mouths and the saliva escaping as they failed to chew with their mouths closed. Strings of saliva stretched between their lips when they opened wide, the bites leaving food between their teeth, and loud swallowing—too much for Ryan to handle. Visions of the wolf from days ago flashed in front of Ryan. His family's mouth noises reminded

him of the beast's fangs ripping Eric Flanagan's skin as it carried him in its mouth.

Something was wrong. Ryan didn't know what—*that's a lie*. He did but admitting it to himself would drive him more insane than he already thought he was.



# CHAPTER TWELVE

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# UNDER PRESSURE

On a Saturday morning, Ryan, once again, struggled with sleep. The potential invasion of poltergeists lingering about the house wasn't what kept him up. He wasn't even sure if they were real or if they would cause any physical harm to him or his family. No, it was something else now. It was the idea of something even more terrifying to Ryan if what he witnessed on Halloween was true—the existence of werewolves in Norton, Ohio.

He stumbled into the kitchen with half shut eyes, sat in his usual place at the table, and placed his forehead on the surface. “Well, you seem to be full bricks in ya feet this mornin’,” Rebecca said to her son with a fizzy laugh, the kind where air sputters. *Her accent is thick this morning*, Ryan thought. He moaned, displeased he was up at all. “That moan has a hint of whine to it,” she pointed out. “Doughnuts are on the counter courtesy of your dad.”

“Is anyone else up?” Ryan yawned as he shuffled his raccoon slippers over the linoleum. The options of fried dough were plenty. It was the first time Ryan had ever gotten first dibs on the doughnuts, and wouldn't you know it; there was a crème filled long john from Jubilee Doughnuts waiting just for him. He never complained about the lack of options when someone brought home doughnuts. Every Wednesday, his mom took Layla and him to Jubilee, across the street from their schools. They liked to sit in the fifties styled shop at the counter with the round stool they twirled on.

“Layla, but she hasn't been out of her room yet. Your brutha is sleeping in as usual. Your dad is down in the garage coming up with a new project to do now that he's home,” Rebecca listed as Ryan shoved a long john in his face. “And you have that get together around eleven this mornin’.”

Ryan's body deflated, remembering he had to go to Colin's party. “How did you know about that?”

“The mother, I think, called to make sure,” Rebecca informed. Ryan waited to see if his mother would add to the thought, but she went back to tearing off pieces of her glazed doughnut, not enjoying it like she used to. “And?”

“And what?”



“What did you tell her?” Ryan said slowly with raised eyebrows.

“Oh! That you’ll be there before noon,” she said with a devilish grin.

“Aw, mom!” Ryan slumped in his seat. “Why’d you tell ‘em that?” Rebecca shrugged her boney shoulders, not understanding the issue. “I don’t think I want to go,” Ryan admitted.

Rebecca breathed in heavily, keeping herself from yelling at her son, “You are most certainly going!” Annoyed, Ryan curled his lip at his mom, scoffing at the thought she had some say about where he goes. *As if she could make me.*

“It’s going to suck. I know it will! I won’t have a good time. I’ll just be miserable!” Rebecca shook her head in disgust at the thought he would be unhappy at a party. *He doesn’t know what being miserable is,* she thought.

“But it ain’t all about you then, now is it?” she argued. She loomed over Ryan as they stood looking at one another, not understanding. “What if you being there is what the boy is looking forward to the most? Maybe he thinks you are great and that’s why he invited you. What if no one else shows up? He would be stood up by a friend who decided he wasn’t worth the time.” Rebecca leaned against the counter again. She looked out into the yard, thinking about when she was younger when people didn’t attend one of her birthdays back home, remembering how heartbreaking it was.

“If taking a few hours of your time brings one person a great memory, one they won’t forget, ain’t it worth it? For the boy to look back on today and remember you being there. I think we owe people, and ourselves, to try and make memories because it’s all this life is, Ryan, a series of moments. Might as well make the best ones because there will be bad, even sad ones sometimes, I can assure you.” She was right. The little things, the moments we think nothing of, can mean the most to others.

Ryan couldn’t tell if she meant herself and her eventual passing, but he understood. He decided to see Colin at his house, if anything, just to please his mom. “Besides, if you don’t go, I’m going to send you with your father to Builder’s Square to buy lumber and all that.” Ryan immediately agreed with his mom to see Colin because a hardware store visit to a kid is like an imprisonment, especially to a nerd like him.

His mother watched her son eat another long john before heading off to take a shower and get dressed for Colin’s get together. “Are you taking me?” Ryan yelled from down the hall.

"No. Just take your bike or walk," she yelled back. Ryan hadn't been on his bike in months since he discovered he had become too big for it. He didn't have any interest in another because he figured he would get a car sooner than later. *My parents buying a car for me would be badass too.*

Ryan entered the bathroom, preparing to leave for the afternoon, as Devin emerged from his room, which he fondly called the dungeon, to discover a lack of doughnut options in the kitchen. "Who the hell ate all the long johns?"

"Your brutha beat ya to it 'dis mornin'?" Rebecca happily educated him, grinning behind a coffee mug. Devin, with all his fabricated angst, snatched the pink frosted strawberry doughnut from the box because they were delicious and carried it back to his bedroom with his mouth. "Wait a bit!" she yelled before Devin could walk down the hallway. "You're going next door and helping Mr. Craggs with housework and whatever else he needs for the next couple of weeks."

Devin curled his lips and wrinkled his nose, placing the doughnut back in his hand. "My ass I am. Why?" Rebecca put her mug on the kitchen table, preparing herself for the upcoming conversation, knowing it might exhaust her. "Watch your tongue with me, boy! You need something else to do besides mope in that dark room of yers. There is something in it for ya when you complete it at the end of the two weeks."

"Like what?" Devin asked with folded arms, indicating skepticism.

"Does it matter? Ya doin' it one way or another," she demanded, laying the accent on thick. Devin petulantly hopped in his seat. "Your other choice is to help your dad with rebuilding the shed. I know how much it may interest you, and you can start by going to the hardware store with him."

The shed in the Hatcher's backyard was a tetanus infection ready to happen. The rickety structure was built by a previous owner who decided to construct it on the uneven ground rather than a concrete base. It leaned to the right, and it was evident the structure was painted white at one time based on the faded coat chips still attached to the rotting wood. It housed mice most of the year. One time, Calvin opened the door and scared a mouse so bad it released its litter suddenly—*true story*. If it weren't for the weathered wood, risking a potential splinter, you'd find a couple of wasp

nests just waiting to strike when someone came in. The place was in rough condition and needed some rebuilding.

He looked, not liking either option. One had a possible reward at the end, and the other made him spend time with his father, which was the last thing he wanted. "Are we ever going to discuss what happened?" a fed-up Devin asked, not beating around the bush.

"Ain't nothing to discuss. Things happen. It don't make 'em right, but we move on as best we can. Maybe you should too." Devin didn't want to argue with his ill mother, but so much anger festered within him he didn't know how to convey it. "Your father will be the only parent ya got sooner or later. Start figuring ya shit out! Yeah?"

Devin began to breathe heavily with tightened lips, filled with hate and nowhere to point it. "It should have been him."

"Oy! What did ya say?"

"I said it should be his miserable ass on a death bed soon, not you!"

The pain in her body was unbearable, but an enraged Rebecca stormed over to Devin and slapped his face, causing the crème filled pastry to fall from his mouth. She felt the burning on her palm, holding it with her other hand as her lips quivered. Rebecca never thought she would ever strike her child, causing her more pain than her brittle palm and fingers ever could. "Don't you ever say that again!" she told her son, holding back her hurt tears. "Your father isn't a perfect man, but you ain't either. So get off your holier-than-thou pedestal and be a son." She looked down at her son, rubbing his cheek where her hand sized red mark. "I'm sorry. We all go a little crazy sometimes and let the animal out. I know that now," she whispered, thinking about weeks ago when she told her husband to get out of her house.

Devin chose to replace his harsh words with a vigorous head nod. He rose from the table, retrieved the fallen doughnut impacted by his mother's slap, and told her, "I'll be next door," before departing to assist Mr. Craggs with household chores for the remainder of the day. Devin checked in on Layla, who was engrossed in her Lite Brite set, inserting colorful pegs into holes on her way to his room. "Hey, Layloo," he greeted, still shaken from the recent altercation.

The Teddy Ruxpin bear on Layloo's dresser shifted its eyes slowly at Devin. The cogs within the cute bear turned vigorously. A spiritual force seemed to possess the toy, desiring acknowledgment from the eldest

Hatcher child. Layla turned her hand towards it and remarked, "It's fine." Devin, unaware of the subtle movement by the primarily inanimate bear, looked around and questioned, "What is?" Layla paused her artistic creation, locking eyes with her brother. "Nothing."

"Better grab a doughnut before they disappear, Layloo," Devin suggested. She nodded, seemingly disinterested in eating. She was on a mission to craft pictures, already amassing a stack of thick black sheets of paper with punched holes. "Okay," she replied, returning her focus to her Lite Brite, subtly signaling her brother to leave. Devin complied, but had he lingered, he might have observed Layla constructing a hallway on the light board, resembling the one in their house with a white figure standing in front of it. The figure would have been black, but transparent pegs in that color weren't available, as they wouldn't contrast against the background.

Devin and Melvin Craggs had never engaged in a conversation before. Despite living side by side, their communication was limited to disingenuous waves from Devin's childhood when he was outside with his mom. Devin understood Melvin didn't hold any affection for his dad, a sentiment he shared at the moment.

Usually, the Hatchers found Melvin tinkering in his garage during the day, but this time was different. Devin stepped into Melvin's garage, noticing it was more organized than he remembered. Not much caught his eye except for a machine under a black tarp on the left side. A shelf filled with magazines inside a water-stained cardboard box piqued Devin's interest. Glancing around to ensure no one was watching, he started thumbing through the different publications, discovering old issues of Guns and Ammo, Playboy, Penthouse, and oddly enough, Vogue. "Craggs, you dirty old man. Guns and hot women. Whatever fills your rub tub, I suppose," he whispered to himself.

"What you doin', boy!" Melvin's voice echoed from behind a screen door. "See somethin' you like?"

Startled by the suddenness of Melvin's smokey voice, Devin's heart skipped a beat. "I wasn't! I just...You got a lot of magazines."

"You ain't seen nothin'," Melvin replied. "Why you in my garage?"

Regaining composure, Devin cleared his throat to explain, "My mom said I should come over and help you with your house. Whatever that means." Melvin scrutinized Devin and nodded, "A'ight."

When Melvin opened the screen door, the stench of cigars and perspiration from inside his home overwhelmed the garage. The smell, a blend of onions on a Skyline chili dog mixed with clothes left in the washer for too long, was unsettling for Devin, accustomed to the cleanliness of his own home.

“Your mama tells me that ya bored. Need somethin’ to keep ya busy,” Melvin continued.

“If I had more magazines, I wouldn’t be,” Devin joked. Realizing the unintentional implication, he became embarrassed, expecting Melvin to kick him out. Instead, the old man raised an eyebrow and stared Devin up and down. “Sense of humor. You goin’ to need dat,” Melvin cracked a smile, walking back into his house. “Come on then. Best you see what you’re working wit now. Pull off da Band-Aid, as dey say.”

As Devin followed Craggs into what he assumed was the living room, he questioned, *how does someone live like this?* Old newspapers and numerous periodicals covered most of the hardwood floors, creating an environment Devin hesitated to tread for fear of crushing something underneath the clutter.

Melvin skillfully navigated through the maze of magazines, effortlessly finding his recliner to settle into. Devin, intrigued, examined the spines of the magazines to discern his neighbor's reading preferences. Each stack represented a specific type of publication—Rolling Stone along one wall, Time Magazine on the opposite side, Newsweek in the middle of the floor near the television, National Geographic overflowing from bookshelves, and oddly, Better Homes and Gardens. *Better Homes and Gardens?* Alongside neatly piled Playboys in the corners.

As he settled into his recliner, the room echoed with the sounds of old man groans, exhales, and a small curdle of snot. Devin, standing by the adult magazines, inquired, “Why do you have so many of these magazines?” referring to all of them, not just the adult ones.

“For the articles, genius—whaddya think they're for?” Melvin sarcastically replied. “Why? You want to borrow one?” Devin contemplated the offer but quickly realized it wouldn't be a good idea for sanitary reasons. “No, thanks. I mean, why keep all of these?”

Lighting a cigar, Melvin sighed, pondering Devin’s question. “Don’t know for sure. I guess I was tired of living in an empty house.” Devin felt a surprising twinge of sympathy for Melvin. There was a profound silence

between them until Devin decided to break it. "So. What do ya want me to do?"

Returning from his thoughts, Melvin pointed to the stacks of magazines and instructed, "All 'dem are goin' to be recycled. Maybe make me some money." Devin glanced around the room at the vast collection and chuckled. "No way."

Melvin held Devin's gaze until he understood. "Wait. Like, really? All of these?"

"Yeah. Start putting 'em in the back of the truck. Go to the garage and get the hand cart. It'll make it easier," Melvin suggested. The prospect of parting with the things keeping him connected to the world made Melvin melancholy. Unbeknownst to others, he had learned about music, politics, news, and even decorating from those papers. However, as time went on, the world became stranger to him, and he lost interest. For Melvin Craggs, the world grew more significant with its advancements, and he found himself a lonely stranger, wandering aimlessly. Unsure of what was happening, he waited for nature to take its course.

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Attempting to gather speed on a bike too small for his size, Ryan pedaled uphill along the bustling street toward Colin's house. Luckily, Norton wasn't a particularly bike friendly area, lacking sidewalks along the roads. The cold air made Ryan's nose run, and he had to pause every few blocks to wipe it on his gloves.

*Colin's place was just a couple of houses away,* Ryan thought, anticipating some warmth at the party.

Upon reaching Colin's house and navigating the dirt driveway, Ryan surveyed the yard. It was strewn with uncollected toys covered in soil, seemingly neglected for a while. The screened-in porch looked ready to collapse, with cracked and chipping blue paint, and the chimney was missing a couple of bricks. The only vehicle at the party was a rusted beige van. *Weird,* Ryan mused. *I expected more people or cars for a party.*

A gentle knock on the front door prompted a young voice, presumably Carlton, to shout, "Someone's here!" Multiple children's chatter overlapped in response. *Those must be the other guests,* Ryan thought.

The creaking wooden door revealed an overweight woman, appearing to be in her fifties. She had a worn out but friendly demeanor, asking, “You must be Ryan!”

“Yes, ma'am,” Ryan politely replied.

“Well then! A boy with manners? Those tend to be rare, especially with this bunch. Call me Mary. Come on in!” She gestured toward the inside of her house, and Ryan entered slowly. Taking in the atmosphere, he realized why Colin often smelled of various foods. The whole place had a distinct odor, a blend of meals lingering over time, as if the home hadn't been ventilated in months. While Ryan couldn't pinpoint any specific smells, it was undeniably pungent.

Navigating through the foyer, Ryan nearly tripped over multiple pairs of shoes on his way to the living room. Kids of various ages and ethnicities were scattered across numerous couches and chairs, engrossed in watching *The Never Ending Story*. Atreyu was about to pass the giant sphinxes with wings, and the boys giggled over the statues' exaggerated features. The same happened in Ryan's class a few months ago when they watched it.

"This is Colin's buddy, Ryan. Give him a shout out." All the youngsters and teens turned their heads, eager to welcome a new face. They greeted Ryan as Mary proceeded to introduce everyone in the room, including the two snoozing infants down the hall. “Pizza's on its way, about thirty minutes out. We snagged a couple of videos from the store on Market Street. Colin's in the kitchen, whipping up his cake. You can catch him in there.” “Making his own cake?” Ryan inquired, forgetting his conversation with the birthday boy. “It's just a quirky thing he likes to try. There's a store bought one if that homemade masterpiece is devoured—and trust me, it will be. We'll need it with this many mouths.” Mary grinned. Ryan responded with a puzzled smile, wondering why the birthday boy was tackling his own cake. Stepping onto the faded, yellow linoleum, once white moons ago, Ryan found Colin waiting for the cake portion to cool.

“Hey, man!” Ryan greeted, relieved to escape the crowded living room triggered his social anxiety. Colin's smile brightened the room, and in his raspy voice, he said, “Cool! You made it on time! Just waiting for it to cool down.” Ryan then recalled Colin's earlier interrogation about cake making, and everything fell into place. “Do you enjoy cooking?” Ryan inquired, attempting to spark a conversation, already anticipating the response. “I hear it's a way to a person's heart. Well...wait. The way to a man's heart is

through his stomach. Yeah. That's it. I heard that on TV, but I'm sure it's the same for a girl too," Colin croaked out with his froggy voice. *That's not the answer I was expecting.* Ryan nodded in agreement, "I can see that."

Ryan peeked into the living room, observing all the kids. Some were familiar from the bus, especially Alicia, the blonde haired one closest to Colin, probably due to their similar ages. Sometimes, she flirted a bit with Ryan, but he never reciprocated. *She's in sixth grade. Nope. That's too weird.*

Alicia, with her usual light brown hair, wore it in a single French braid today—a style Ryan never particularly cared for, but somehow it worked for her. As he glanced her way, she caught him staring. Flustered, Ryan quickly retreated into the kitchen, hoping she would stay put.

No such luck. The sound of couch springs echoed as Alicia leaped off the couch. "Hey, Ryan!" she exclaimed, playfully raising her eyebrows, making it clear she was in a flirtatious mood. "Hi, Alicia," Ryan sighed.

"I noticed you were looking, so I wanted you to know I noticed. I think you're pretty."

*Good grief. This feels like a real Lucy and Schroeder moment—why do I reference Peanuts so much in my head?*

"I'll be around if you want to be alone," Alicia added, awkwardly hitting her cheek with a Blow Pop, attempting to be seductive as she sauntered away. Ryan rolled his eyes, shook his head, and returned his attention to Colin, who was laughing. "You sure do have it easy, don't ya? I mean, girls seem to really like you."

"It's not all fun and games when they're younger than you and say weird things. It's kinda gross," Ryan admitted, unsure why it seemed that way with him. Do other guys have this problem? Is it a Norton thing? The answer was no; it did not happen to many guys in middle school going to high school. A modest Ryan Hatcher never aimed for popularity or to act tough. He just tried to be as pleasant and intelligent as possible, and the way girls approached him just happened. Yet, there was only one who had his attention.

"Before I forget, I got these two packs of GPK cards. I know you liked the ones I gave you, so here are fresh packs," Ryan handed Colin his gift, purchased with Scott a couple of weeks back. He had forgotten he had them and thought it would be cool to give his younger friend. "Sweet! These have gum in them?" Colin asked excitedly.



“Yep,” Ryan quickly answered.

“Is it good?”

“Assuming you don’t break your jaw biting into it—it’s still not good. It tastes like cardboard after a minute of chewing—kind of like the Fruit Stripe gum.”

A robust knock echoed from the front door, prompting the kids to leap out of their seats, eagerly anticipating the arrival of Domino’s pizza. Mary headed toward the door, accompanied by another adult woman, younger than her. *Maybe a relative?* The older kids returned with two pizzas each, some carrying bags of soda pop with the company’s mascot, The Noid, printed on them. There were ten pies—two cheese, two sausages, four pepperonis, and two deluxe.

As all the kids gathered around the long dining room table, Ryan counted eighteen people, excluding the infants being cared for by the other woman. Colin has way more friends than I realized, Ryan thought, surprised. Everyone grabbed a paper plate and dug in. Not wanting to appear greedy, Ryan waited until the others had gotten their share.

“Hey! We have a guest! What do we do when that happens?” Mary shouted over the television. The children all moaned, “Be courteous.” Mary nodded, waiting for Ryan to grab a slice. A little boy, whose name he couldn’t remember, offered his slice of pizza with a bite mark. Ryan shook his head and told him, “You have it. I’m trying to cut back on other people’s saliva.” Not understanding Ryan’s remark, he giggled and turned back toward the television set. Having had pizza the night before, the thought of eating it again wasn’t appetizing anyway.

“Well, Ryan. Did you think you’d ever see a house with this many kids?” Mary asked as the table awaited a response. “No, I don’t think I ever have.”

“Yeah. We’re all like family. They all think of themselves as brothers and sisters even if technically they’re not. Except for Julie and John over there, they’re actual siblings,” Mary explained as she balanced holding one of the crying infants while opening the door for the pizza delivery man knocking on the door.

Confused, Ryan looked around the table, realizing the nature of this household. *I am so stupid for not putting it together sooner with all these kids.* Colin didn’t have this many friends, sort to speak—this was his foster family. Colin was an orphan living in a foster home, waiting to be adopted

by a real family. It never occurred to Ryan that other kids he went to school with had a more challenging life than he did. When you meet someone and become friends, people assume they have a life like your own, maybe better. Ryan never fathomed what it was like for Colin; he was just a guy he talked to on the bus.

*I feel awful. I don't know why. I just do.*

The children fired questions at Ryan about his hobbies, family, and various topics around the table, taking turns almost in order. Each answer from Ryan sparked another question immediately. He now comprehended the source of Colin's curiosity; every kid in the house seemed like a sponge, eagerly soaking in knowledge about a world they were unfamiliar with.

"Ryan gave me a couple of packs of cards for my birthday!" Colin proudly announced to the table.

"Were they those gross ones that are popular?" Mary asked with disdain.

"He seemed to like the ones I gave him, so I figured it was fine to do," Ryan interjected cautiously, worried he might have inadvertently gotten Colin into trouble.

"I don't care for 'em, but at least he has some kind of hobby, finally," she responded. Colin gazed away, contemplating the abundance of cards released before the current series. "Can you still get the older cards? I think those are better tha...."

Colin's mouth and face abruptly stopped moving, his eyes widened, and his mouth hung open. Ryan waited for him to finish his thought, tilting his head forward in confusion. Looking around the table, he realized it wasn't just Colin; four other kids had frozen in place, and the rest of the table seemed to slow to a crawl as they ate and spoke. The sounds of low, sluggish voices turned into background noise as a high frequency pitch rang in Ryan's ears, compelling him to put a pointer finger in his right ear canal.

Isaiah, a young Black boy, froze with the pointed end of a fresh slice of pizza inches from his face. Alicia froze as she picked off a pepperoni. A Latino boy, Luis, *if I remember correctly*—one of the older kids paused mid-laugh. A little ginger haired boy in kindergarten, Alex, froze while patiently waiting for another serving. And then there was Colin, mouth agape in mid-sentence, staring at Ryan.

Petrified, Ryan shut his eyes, trying to block out the unsettling sounds until the pops and cracks reclaimed his attention—like static on a television

channel after midnight. Hesitating, he cautiously opened his eyelids. The five children, frozen in time, now stared at him with chewed food tumbling from their gaping mouths, dropping onto the table and floor. Unearthly voices, whispers of sadness, began to emanate, their eyes shifting upward into their lids. Ryan, desperate to maintain his sanity, placed his other finger into the opposite ear and began chanting, *It's not real. The voices are from exhaustion.*

*"Look what it did to me!"* a female voice materialized from Colin. Startled, Ryan withdrew his fingers, discovering blood on his fingertips. *"It hurts so bad,"* a young man's voice echoed through Alicia's open mouth. The five's heads began to shake back and forth. *They're cold,* Ryan realized.

*"What can we do but tell you?"* an older man's voice with a Brooklyn accent came from Isaiah. *"No one whole here to tell. So we cling to you. So cold, but don't want to burn,"* the red-headed boy, Alex, spouted using another man's voice. *"Listen to the little one! The girl!"*

*"Where's my cat?"*

*"I just wanted to have some fun with the redhead."*

*"Just went for a run."*

*"All I wanted was some food. A warm place to sleep."*

*"Had to go to a party."*

*"Help us. Help you. Tell you, help us. You'll be torn apart like me, from your balls to your stomach, if you don't listen,"* a final voice began, emanating from Luis, *"Help us. Help you. You die if we don't try. You die, we fry! Can you help us? Help them! Save you! Save them! Save us!"* The voices escalated into a haunting crescendo, intensifying the horror gripping the room.

The bodies of Ryan's friends began to convulse, their limbs jerking erratically, while the rest of the table moved in eerie slow motion, oblivious to the grotesque phenomenon unfolding. *Why would they notice?* It was only happening to Ryan, thanks to his cursed sight. He alone witnessed the horrors consuming Colin and the four other foster children, their bodies manipulated in macabre ways. From each spirit, distorted sounds echoed, imitating the moments of their deaths. Yells, gasps, and choking noises polluted the air until Colin shrieked, *"Daddy!"*—the haunting girl's voice again, likely the same as the one he had encountered in Layla's room.

Slapping his hands over his ears this time, Ryan shut his eyes, desperately whispering to himself it wasn't real and malevolent entities

weren't tormenting his friends. Ryan's mind flashed back to when darkness in the hall had approached him as he tried sleeping on the couch. Hiding under the blanket had worked then, so he envisioned it now—a massive blue blanket enveloping him, warding off the malevolence. *But this isn't my imagination. This is real somehow.*

The cacophony abruptly ceased, and Ryan cautiously shifted his eyes, peering through the cracks between his fingers, grappling with the humiliation of a person his age cowering like a frightened child. Then, with a deep breath, Ryan slid his hands over his face to his chin, bracing himself for the unimaginable sights awaiting him.

The five bodies—Colin, Alicia, Luis, Isaiah, and Alex—reclined in their chairs as the specters of the deceased, possessing them, loomed behind. The dead gazed down at the dismemberments they had endured, now grotesquely projected onto the children. The hijacked bodies, serving as unwitting avatars, slumped over in their chairs, their flesh tearing on various areas of their limbs and torsos.

A red-headed girl in a tattered pink dress peered down at Colin and his shredded torso, a leg missing. An older man stood behind Isaiah, observing him from the left side. The man didn't want to look at the angle; he couldn't help but do so. His head dangled from what remained of his neck. A man wearing a bloody varsity jacket, a ghost Ryan hadn't noticed until now, lingered behind a slumped over Alicia. He scratched his devoured stomach, spreading blood over his hands and body, perplexed as the mess cascaded over Alicia's hair.

Dressed in black running attire, a man whom Ryan had seen in front of the blue spruce pushed Alex's chair, violently shaking his corpse until it tumbled onto the floor, jolting Ryan. Finally, a teenager clad in regular street clothes stood behind Luis, picking at his groin, attempting to find something no longer there—his genitals. He examined his hands and saw blood and lumpy remains of testicles, screaming without any sound emerging from his mouth.

The atmosphere thickened with horror as the macabre scene unfolded, each detail intensifying the dreadful reality before Ryan's eyes.

They were all dead.

*Kill it! Help yourself. They are not what they seem. End our suffering. Help us! Save them!* The voices intensified, growing louder. Drained, Ryan

slumped in his seat, his head landing at the edge of the dining room table, and he tumbled onto the gray, dull carpet floor.

“Ryan? Ryan!” came an urgent call from his friend Colin. Whispers and murmurs surrounded Ryan as he slowly opened his eyes. Beside him, Mary, the foster mother, inquired, “What happened? You all right?” Widening his eyes and attempting to shake off the haze, he observed the kids staring at him, curious about the sudden turn of events. Once his focus sharpened, Ryan realized all five of his new friends were perfectly fine. Everything he had witnessed was merely a hallucination.

*But it felt so real. It had to be true. It has to mean something. It has to.*

To mask the embarrassment of passing out at the dinner table, Ryan laughed and needed to conjure up an excuse to save face. “I guess I’m not used to many people in one place,” he chuckled, assuring them he would be fine. The girl assisting with the house and the younger kids offered comfort, admitting, “Probably just a spout of anxiety. I get that.” Ryan nodded, appreciating the gesture. *Anxiety. If only.*

Alicia suggested Ryan relax on the couch, a ploy to sit next to him during the subsequent movie, *Labyrinth*. While it wasn’t Ryan’s preferred choice, he obliged, watching as the younger kids reveled in the puppetry courtesy of Jim Henson and his team. Musical fantasies never quite appealed to him although David Bowie seemed to be doing something for the older girls in the house, evident in their shifting seats and hushed conversations when the infamous bulge appeared on screen. Meanwhile, the younger ones chuckled, much like the boys had earlier when genitalia made an appearance. Ryan pursed his lips, pondering why some movie studio executive hadn’t advised Bowie to tone down on the weiner lump, considering it was a kids’ film.

It was time for cake, and Colin gleefully took charge of serving the dessert. Dancing into the kitchen, he fetched paper plates and plastic forks, handing everyone a small slice. As the family took their first bites, their eyes widened, some slowly chewing and forcing the cake down their throats. Alicia was the first to spit it out, and a few others followed suit. Colin’s eyes began to well up, attempting to suppress the quivering of his mouth as he stormed back into the kitchen. Concerned, Ryan slowly stood from his seat on the couch and walked to the kitchen.

Mary observed as Colin read over the box instructions he had retrieved from the trash, determined to figure out what had gone wrong. Frustration

overcame Colin, and sadness took hold. He turned to Mary, embraced her, and sobbed, “No one is ever going to want me! I can’t do anything! I thought someone would want me to come home if I cooked well. People like to eat. That’s what I heard. I heard it was a way to their hearts!” Colin muffled his sobs into Mary’s clothes, now soaked with his tears. Hearing everything Colin said, Ryan stood back, realizing the truth behind the constant questions about food and the desire to master baking. Colin wanted to excel at something, to impress others and increase his chances of being adopted by a family. Feeling helpless, Ryan tiptoed from the poignant moment Colin and Mary shared, unable to offer words or actions to ease his friend's pain. Later in their friendship, Ryan discovered Colin never knew his exact nationality because he had no knowledge of it.

The film concluded, signaling it was time for Ryan to head home. Expressing gratitude and bidding farewell to everyone, he joined Colin outside. As they strolled around the muddy areas in the driveway, Colin suggested, “You should come by more.” Surprised at his own openness, Ryan replied, “You too. I’ll give you my address.” He realized he had almost avoided inviting Colin to his house just hours earlier; a change in perspective can be incredible.

“That’s going to be hard. It’s a long walk,” Colin explained. Puzzled, Ryan looked around, asking, “Where’s your bike?” Colin, looking embarrassed, admitted, “Don’t have one.” A wave of guilt washed over Ryan; he had momentarily forgotten Colin wasn't as fortunate as he was. Glancing at his blue bike, then at his own body, Ryan asked, “Can I use your phone?” Colin followed Ryan back inside, and during the conversation, Ryan learned about the Norton Fall Festival on Wednesday, the 29th. Though intrigued, he needed to ensure he could hear his parents' response, so he motioned for Colin to keep it down with a wry smile.

Calling his mom for a ride home, Ryan shared a sincere moment with Colin and his foster siblings. Ryan explained, “Just wanting to create one of those moments” as he looked at Colin and the rest of the foster family.

Walking outside with Colin, they discussed the possibility of Ryan joining them at the festival for a night of junk food and rides, considering the dropping temperature. He promised to think about it, making no guarantees. Moments later, Rebecca drove up, finding the boys hanging out. Ryan approached the car, leaving his bike behind. Colin questioned, “Wait! What about your bike?”

With a crooked grin, Ryan responded, "It's not my bike anymore. It's yours."

Confused, Colin asked, "What do you mean?"

"I'm too big for it. It's more your size. Happy Birthday!"

Colin, unsure of what to say, gave Ryan a high five and expressed gratitude with a quivering lip and a raspy voice. As Rebecca reversed down the driveway, Ryan observed Colin running into the house to share the news of his "sorta new bike" with the eager foster siblings. Rebecca acknowledged, "That was a nice thing to do," but Ryan remained silent about the nature of the house being a foster home. Ignorant about the adoption process, he pondered why it was a secret and why finding families for foster children seemed challenging. Despite his lack of understanding, one conviction remained:

"Every kid should have a bike."





# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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# ALIVE AND KICKING

Surviving Halloween night was nothing short of a miracle for Eric Flanagan. The Lycan's teeth had left mutated marks on the sides of his torso, resulting in considerable blood loss. The canines alone, piercing through his lungs, should have spelled his demise.

Remarkably, Eric spent only a week in the hospital, defying doctors' expectations. Professionals advised him to take a week off school for recovery, warning of scars from the wounds. Eric, however, remained focused on his room, avoiding his abusive father and completing missed school assignments. Valerie's daily delivery of his work became a lifeline, fostering an unexpected shift in Eric's perspective on education. Facing death seemed to kindle a desire for self-improvement, a longing to escape the purgatory of living with an abusive parent.

Word spread about Eric's animal attack in the Akron area, thanks to his father's opportunistic ad and interviews with the local news station. Conor Flanagan, seeking money for his son's hospital bills he had no intention of paying, resorted to scams to avoid working. Thousands of dollars poured in, mostly squandered on alcohol, as Eric suspected.

As Monday, November 20th approached, the week of Thanksgiving, Eric experienced several nights of uninterrupted sleep. Absent were the belligerent encounters with his father and haunting nightmares. Opening his eyes, he felt refreshed and glanced around his room. Posters of bikini clad models and bands adorned the wood paneled walls, reminders of his father's freebies from the local ABC store.

Eric's bedroom floor, cluttered with repeatedly worn clothes and discarded food wrappers, had not seen the light in weeks. A layer of dust coated the ceiling fan blades, prompting a newfound concern for cleanliness. Eric wrinkled his nose at the unpleasant odor his room emitted, a blend of dirty clothes and food remnants. As he checked his own body, relief washed over him as he realized the unpleasant scent didn't emanate from him. Daily showers, a new routine post attack, ensured personal hygiene.

Wearing only blue and white striped boxers, Eric turned to the mirror on his dresser. Amidst the mess on the floor, he inspected the scarring from the creature's attack. Initially blurry eyed, he couldn't discern any red marks or protrusions. After wiping his eyes, Eric realized his body was not disfigured; in fact, it appeared better than before. His chest and arms were more toned, with a hint of developing abs on his stomach's top part. Puzzled, Eric wondered if the change was due to his diminished appetite since the attack. *I feel like I should, but I have no desire to.*

Attempting not to fixate on his altered body, Eric resolved to get ready for school. It was his first day back, and for the first time in a long while, he was genuinely looking forward to it. Eager to reunite with his friends, particularly Valerie, he started pulling at his drawers. The old dresser, a hand-me-down from a neighbor when Eric's mother passed away, gave him a hard time as the drawers resisted sliding smoothly on their track. Frustration mounting, Eric gritted his teeth and, with a surge of strength, yanked the drawer out, accidentally hurling it against the wall and denting it. Perplexed, Eric examined his hand, then glanced at the wall and the damaged drawer.

Carefully, he placed the fallen clothes back into the drawer, leaving out a plain long sleeved white shirt, and gently slid it back into place. Spotting a pair of jeans on the floor passing the smell test – a more sensitive nose now made it harder for previously worn clothes to pass – Eric looked into the mirror. He pushed back his long red hair from both sides of his face and pulled it back. While he appreciated his unique long ginger locks, he was tired of hiding his face. *It's time for something different.*

*You are feeling excellent now.*

Eric heard it, a sound echoing in the room, or *my head*, yet there was no one present. He shook his head, contemplating whether he was speaking aloud to himself. His gaze scanned the corners of his room, a growing concern his mind might be faltering or the animal attack and near death experience had left an indelible mark on his sanity. With his hair pulled back and dressed in a simple outfit, Eric nervously backed out of his room, a creeping paranoia suggesting he was being stalked. Shaking off the eerie sensation, he shrugged his shoulders, redirecting his focus to brushing his teeth, and eventually tiptoeing around his father.

Conor would typically be passed out on the recliner at this hour, allowing Eric to navigate the house in silence, avoiding the verbal

onslaught potentially ruining his day. As he glanced around the Flanagan residence, disgust welled up at the state of his home. His dad had allowed it to deteriorate, and now there was an inexplicable urge to clean everything in sight. The pervasive scent inside the house triggered an obsessive compulsive tick, leaving Eric bewildered and frightened by the changes in his own body.

Reaching the front door just as Conor snored himself awake, Eric knew there was no escaping the impending verbal lashing. He would endure the familiar routine, roll his eyes in defiance, and then leave. It was the same old song and dance he knew too well.

"Where you goin'?" Conor rasped, hacking a wad of phlegm and spitting it into a beer can beside him, accompanied by a full ashtray. "School. The same place I usually go when you wake up in the chair as I'm leaving," Eric replied, anticipating the confrontation. Conor sat up, ready to stand, his chest puffing outward. "You bein' smart with me, boyo?"

Conor was accustomed to his son staggering backward when he lunged, but this time, it didn't happen. "You think you're hot shit, don't ya?" Eric remained silent, unwilling to entertain his father's nonsense. Conor, still too intoxicated to bother lifting a foot off his recliner, let alone stand, locked eyes with Eric. They faced each other like gunslingers, poised for a showdown at high noon.

"Get your ass to school. Get a job to pay back the hospital bill you accrued for being a dumb ass in the first place, or I'll take it out of your ass," Conor threatened, reclining in his seat, ready to drift into unconsciousness. Eric had a plethora of potential responses, a myriad of insults he could have hurled, but he chose to hold his tongue.

*You can't bring attention to yourself now.*

"Heh?"

Surveying his surroundings, Eric strained to identify the mysterious voice he had heard. Glancing back at his father, who had now closed his drunken eyes and was shaking his head in disappointment, Eric couldn't help but wonder about the turmoil within a man who had given up, consumed by rage. Closing the door behind him, Eric paused, his ears perking up at the sound of scuttling nearby. Although he couldn't pinpoint its origin, he peered behind him, staring at his house's front door. Once painted sky blue, it had deteriorated into dark, rotting wood with large clusters of faded paint chipped away over time. Leaning closer, Eric

brought his right ear near the door, listening to the deafening noise of termites within. Before he could place his ear upon it, the sound intensified. Bewildered, Eric pulled back, covering his ears, struggling to comprehend what he had just heard and questioning how and why he could hear it.

Dismissing it as an unusual occurrence, Eric Flanagan made his way to his car, started the engine, and expressed gratitude when it turned on. Driving to school for the first time in two weeks, he pondered what to expect on his return, sensing it would be different.

Within the high school, adorned with banners and flyers for the Norton fall festival, attempts were made to attract attendees for the week after Thanksgiving, from Monday, November 27th to Wednesday, the 29th. The idea of a fall festival in potential snow seemed odd, but the school board sought donations to support all four schools: Norton Primary, Intermediate, Middle, and High School.

Valerie Donovan approached Devin, who stood at his rusted colored locker gathering materials for Science Lab. Her sudden appearance startled him as he closed the locker door, revealing her gorgeous face. "Sorry," she said with a smile, rendering Devin unable to stay upset, *look at those eyes*. He secretly hoped she would gently end things with Eric after his outburst before the accident. Uncertain if Eric would return yet, neither Devin nor Valerie had seen him since he came home from the hospital.

"Have you seen him yet?" Valerie inquired of Devin, raising an eyebrow, referring to Eric. Devin rose onto his toes, scanning over her as if expecting to discover Eric nearby, as if she posed a trick question. "No. Not yet."

"I've heard things, like he looks so different. I hope he isn't too badly scarred, but that could be kind of hot, right?" Valerie gossiped. Devin deflated, realizing she had no intention of ending things with Eric. Confused and angered, Devin began, "Why would you want to be with—." The answer to his question appeared, strolling around the corner at the other end of the hall.

Eric emerged, strutting down the hall during the final moments between the second and third periods. While Valerie and Devin felt guilty for not going after Eric when the animal dragged him away, Devin worried Eric might hold a grudge, forgetting the terrible things said on Halloween night.

Valerie observed her boyfriend, Eric Flanagan, approaching them as he opened a soda. She noticed he filled out his shirt better, walking with a

different swagger and pulled back hair—a fresher look. Even Devin couldn't deny Eric looked good for a guy nearly torn in half. After contemplating for a moment, he wondered how it was possible.

"Hey guys," Eric nervously greeted. Smitten by Eric and his new swagger, Valerie chuckled and said, "Hey. You look butt—better. A couple of weeks away seemed to do you good—I mean, did you some good—did some good for you," Valerie stumbled through her compliment, embarrassed. Eric laughed under his breath and thanked her as Devin ground the teeth, annoyed. "Devin!" Eric pointed, "I need to talk to you at lunch, cool?" Devin, giving a halfhearted smile, replied, "Sounds good."

"I'll see you all later. At lunch, I guess," Eric confirmed. Valerie went in to kiss him, but he had already walked away, not concerned about public displays of affection. Disappointed, Valerie watched Eric walking away, then shrugged, telling him she would see them in an hour or so. Devin stood in the hall, observing Valerie's confident stride. As much as he enjoyed looking at Valerie, Eric perplexed him, wondering how someone could look like the same person but come across so different, *so confident*, in two weeks. All he could do was chalk it up to a possible reevaluation of life, hopefully for Eric's sake.

Lunchtime arrived, and Devin settled into the round table tucked away at the back of the cafeteria, the designated spot for those seeking solitude. Opting for the orange chair this time, he observed the cafeteria's vibrant assortment of chairs in yellow, orange, blue, and puke green. Sitting solo wasn't his preference, but most of his friends had a different lunch period.

While Valerie occupied a seat with her fashionable clique of girlfriends, Eric entered through the east entrance and spotted Devin at their usual spot. A mutual nod acknowledged each other's presence. "Can only stay a minute," Eric mentioned. Devin kicked out the nearby blue chair, inviting Eric to join. "What's up?" Devin asked, casually adding a straw to his chocolate milk. It took a moment for Eric to gather the nerve to share what was on his mind. As Eric began, he nervously twisted his fist inside the palm of his other hand—a rare display of vulnerability.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry," he confessed. Devin furrowed his brow, slightly bewildered by this unexpected apology. It wasn't typical for Eric to express regret, or was it? "I said some things, called your mother something I'd never hear myself say, and for if I hurt your brother that night." The memories of Halloween night flooded back to Devin, and amid

the chaos, he recalled uttering a hurtful name his mother had warned him never to use, leading to Eric's retaliation.

"Sorry I hit you," Devin mumbled, averting his gaze. Simultaneously, they nodded and exchanged a casual "cool," followed by a shared chuckle. As Eric excused himself, mentioning the need to catch up on some work, Devin reassured him, "Go do what you need to do." Watching Eric leave, Devin was left contemplating the recent exchange, feeling a lingering uncertainty about whether Eric would remain the same person and friend. *Maybe he will move on from me as well.*

*You cannot fight it. It's in you, no matter how you mask it.*

The school day ended, and Eric Flanagan made his way to his car in the student parking lot, acutely aware of the curious gazes from his fellow students. They wanted answers about the mysterious events surrounding him but hesitated to inquire due to his fierce reputation. Seated at the end of his Pontiac, Eric waited for Devin to finish his class, uncertain whether Devin and Valerie intended to ride with him.

During the wait, Eric sensed an unsettling presence. He turned to the road, locking eyes with a short, older woman observing him intently. She stood by the crosswalk, waiting for the signal to cross. As the traffic halted, she hastened towards the school parking lot.

The woman sported Jordache mom jeans, a yellow floral blouse, and oversized prescription glasses. Her frizzy hair danced in the wind as she vigorously waved at Eric, seeking his attention. Uneasy, Eric approached his car's driver's side as the woman shouted, "I know you! Please wait, I need to talk to you!" Devin and Valerie emerged from the school, pausing their conversation to witness the bizarre encounter.

The desperate woman exclaimed, "I heard about what happened to you. It was an animal that hurt you, wasn't it?! My daughter and husband died because of an animal attack, just like that boy!" She pleaded with Eric to alleviate her torment.

Attempting to defuse the situation, Eric gently pushed her away, asking, "I'm sorry, lady, but what do you want me to do about it?" Devin intervened, questioning her motives. The woman insisted Eric harbored the beast within, as depicted in books and shows. In a desperate bid to free herself from the pain, she began to undress, provoking the supposed beast within Eric.

Growing agitated, Eric attempted to stop the woman from exposing herself in front of the high school students. She grinned manically, her disheveled appearance revealing the toll of sleepless nights fueled by fear. The onlooking students buzzed with curiosity, wondering what Eric had done to provoke such a reaction.

Devin calmly intervened, leading the woman away. She claimed to have been watching him and warned him to keep an eye on his friend, suggesting Devin possessed the same dark essence. Pushed away, the woman straightened her blouse, delivering a haunting message before departing to the street.

Laughing maniacally, she ripped out her curly hair, declaring one of them had to die to set her family's souls free. Valerie, sensing the woman's intentions, ran after her, with Devin and Eric in pursuit, shouting, "No! Don't do it!"

In the middle of the street, the woman prepared for a tragic end. As they watched in silent anticipation, the trio assessed the traffic, hoping to intervene without risking injury. The wind tousled the woman's hair as she rocked back and forth, uttering ominous words.

A ghostly figure, adorned in tattered clothes stained with the blood of the beast's victims, appeared behind the three friends who continued to plea for her safety. Unbeknownst to the trio, the dead girl screamed for the girl. Oblivious to the student's confusion, the woman waved at the spectral presence. She understood now.

The distressed woman realized what needed to be done—at least what she thought should happen to know peace again. A horn blared as the woman leaped backward onto oncoming traffic. The semi-truck slowed before, colliding with her body at thirty miles per hour. Valerie collapsed onto the sidewalk, shielding her eyes from the gruesome impact. Devin and Eric witnessed the woman's lifeless body fly through the air before landing headfirst on the road, her skull cracking against the concrete.

Her body sprawled across both lanes, bringing traffic to a standstill. Onlookers gasped, some rushing to help, but it was too late. The police identified her as Maria Blake, mother to the deceased Anna and husband to recently deceased Phillip Blake—a family brutalized by a large animal weeks prior. The Blake family tragedy would echo through the communities for years, a tale of one set free and two remaining, haunting her. Little did Maria know, despite her futile sacrifice, her family's souls remained



ensnared in limbo, neither in Heaven nor Hell, but cursed apparitions that occasionally haunted and unsettled Layla Hatcher.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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# YOU MIGHT THINK

Ryan perched himself on the arm of an old beige sofa nestled in the woods, shaded by the embrace of ancient trees. The sofa had found its place there, undisturbed for years, offering Ryan a secluded spot for some peace—well, almost peace, considering the company of Scott and Colin. They were engrossed in flipping through an aged *Playboy* issue from several years back, featuring Justine Grenier from February 1984—a *classic*, in their opinion, unsure if the paint smears were from rain over the years or other substances—maybe both.

The tale spun by his brother about Maria Blake on the day she passed lingered in Ryan's mind, amplifying his suspicions about the peculiar occurrences he had witnessed lately. Scott, noticing Ryan's despondency for several days, had become rather tiresome. On the other hand, Colin, never having seen a naked woman before, had claimed dibs on the magazine, thoroughly captivated—one of the small blessings Ryan bestowed upon him.

"What's the matter with you there, Mopey-MaGoo?" Scott teased, a customary practice of adding "MaGee" or "MaGoo" to someone's mood, occasionally throwing in a "McPouty" for variety. Ryan, gazing into the woods, uninterested in the exposed women, replied with a nonchalant, "Nothin'." Scott snatched the magazine from Colin to highlight a specific page, but unfortunately, the Bunnies had suffered from fading over time due to the elements. While the boys kept the pages safeguarded under the cushions, it couldn't prevent the inevitable color bleeding.

Scott playfully hurled the magazine at Ryan's head. Startled, Ryan juggled it in his hands, ensuring it didn't land on the damp leaves below. As he looked down, a pair of bare breasts greeted him. "Look at those chug jugs and tell me you don't feel better," Scott grinned. Unfazed, Ryan shook his head and retorted, "Yeah, yeah. Seen those a bunch of times already." Perplexed by the idea someone could see a pair of breasts too many times, Scott raised an eyebrow, questioning, "You goin' funny on me?" Ryan glanced over, shaking his head, "Guess I'm just not in the mood." Colin

eagerly grabbed the magazine from Ryan, his tongue sticking out, anticipating more nudity.

It was a brisk day; a couple of days post the traffic accident involving Maria Blake. Ryan wasn't entirely sure why he decided to enter the woods. After what happened to Eric in those woods, fear should have gripped him, but it didn't—after all, there wasn't a full moon tonight.

"Hi boys!" a voice behind a tree exclaimed. "Jesus!" they all shouted, startled by the unexpected presence. They scanned the surroundings, with Ryan leaping from the arm, Colin rushing to a nearby tree, and Scott collapsing onto the ground in a fetal position.

A light cackle resonated from behind a large oak tree as Christina emerged, holding her sides. "That was too good!" Ryan shook his head, initially in disbelief at the scare but then smiled, glad to see her. "That's not funny!" Colin's voice echoed from a distance.

"Oh, it was very funny! The look on your faces!" she laughed, trying to catch her breath. The boys composed themselves, retaking their spots on the couch, with Ryan now on top, Colin on the arm, and Scott on the cushions. "Whatcha lookin' at? Naked girls?" Christy asked with a mischievous grin, knowing where guys stashed the goods.

She shook her head, reached under the cushion, and pulled out an issue of Hustler. The guys exchanged uncertain glances, caught off guard by the unexpected turn of events. Eyes wide open, they looked at each other, unsure of how to respond without sounding like perverts.

"I, for one, am appalled by this. To think such people would hide this...." Scott pretended, attempting to maintain a semblance of moral outrage.

"Cut the shit, Donovan. It's not exactly a secret," Christy retorted, dismissing Scott's feigned shock. She opened the magazine and began flipping through the pages. Ryan observed her unflinching eyes scanning the explicit content, impressed by her nonchalant attitude. Most girls would have reacted differently, either laughing or calling them perverts, but not Christy.

As Christina examined the voluptuous models on the pages, a wave of insecurity washed over her. She couldn't help but glance at her own chest, wondering if anyone would appreciate her the same way the guys seemed to envy those models. Unlike the magazine's models, Christina didn't have

large breasts. She looked over at Ryan, who remained lost in his thoughts, contemplating whether size truly mattered. *Am I good enough?*

"You realize most women don't look like this, right?" she stated, breaking the silence. Scott swiftly swiped the magazine from her and flipped through it. "You know, it's amazing how little I care right now," he replied with a sarcastic smile, prompting laughter from Ryan and Colin. Christy, however, turned her attention to Colin, only now realizing a sixth grader was being exposed to such explicit content.

"You guys! What the hell are you showin' him?" she exclaimed, disapproval evident in her voice.

"Oh, what difference does it make! He's going to see this stuff sooner or later if he hasn't already!" Scott declared. Colin chimed in, supporting his new friend, "Yeah, my older brothers keep this stuff in their room. No big deal." *That was a lie*, Ryan thought. Colin wouldn't be nearly as excited if that were the case.

Skeptically, Christy shot a look at Colin as he nervously looked away. Scott turned his gaze to Ryan, observing Christina shuffling leaves around with her feet. "Speaking of smutty stuff, could you diddle Hatcher's pickle to help him lighten up? He's been in a mood all week. Longer—probably." Partially offended, Christy stomped and huffed. She brought her fist back and punched Scott on the shoulder, calling him a creep and other similar nouns.

Still, Christina acknowledged Scott made an excellent observation. "You noticed that too, huh?" Christy eventually agreed. "He won't tell me what's bothering him." They both began to talk about Ryan in front of him. *Do they realize I can hear them?* Colin watched them gab, not understanding what the fuss was over. To him, Ryan was the perfect friend right now, not noticing his recent change in demeanor.

Ryan grew tired of the chatter, becoming angry they could not leave him or his thoughts alone. Screw it! "I think there is more than one werewolf living in the neighborhood," he shouted to stop their endless gossiping.

They all shut their mouths and stared at their friend, ignoring the porn mag, hoping he hadn't gone insane. After close to a minute of silence, Scott bit the bottom of his lip and said, "Okay...explain."

Meanwhile, Devin Hatcher was finishing painting Mr. Cragg's floorboard trim. The garage door remained open, keeping the house cold the way Melvin liked it, freezing Devin. Melvin sat in his recliner, rubbing his

bald, age spotted head, reading a National Geographic, and watching his neighbor work. “You done good, boy. Gettin’ all dat shit out of mah house,” he complimented. Devin didn’t realize the day when he began working for Melvin Craggs it wasn’t just the living room with stacks of magazines and books. Some were in the bedroom, kitchen, and even the bathroom.

*This had better be worth it*, Devin thought, and rightly so.

The sound of footsteps came from the garage, and both Devin and Melvin shifted their bodies to see who was at the garage door. It was a girl; they were both sure of it. The sunlight outlined her figure and made her blonde hair glow.

“Valerie?” Devin asked unsurely.

“Yeah. It’s me. Your mom said you were over here. Sorry,” she explained. Devin jumped onto his feet to walk over to the swinging screen door. “You all right?” Devin asked her, noticing an insecure expression rare for Valerie—*she was always confident in herself*. As he opened the door to come outside, Devin told Melvin he would be right back. Cigar smoke wafted from inside the house, causing Valerie to cough as she walked from the entrance. Even with all the cleaning Devin accomplished on the house, it was not enough to rid the home of its stench.

“I can’t stay long, but there is a party this Saturday night at a friend’s house in Wadsworth, and I wondered if you would want to go with me,” she asked. It was a dream come true for Devin. Valerie Donovan, the beautiful creature he has been smitten by since childhood, invited him on a date, *sort of*.

“Wait,” Devin had a sudden revelation, “What about Eric?” Valerie looked away and mumbled, “We broke up.” He thought his ears had deceived him, so he asked to make sure, “Say what?”

“He called me yesterday and told me he wasn’t feeling good about the relationship anymore and thought it would be best to end it,” she explained. Devin stopped and thought, *doesn’t seem like something Eric would say. I thought he would be, well, less considerate, I suppose*.

“It was just weird,” Valerie continued. “Just came out of nowhere. It’s like he’s different now. Like the attack, it...it changed him.” Devin couldn’t argue with her, but now he felt like he had to go by the unwritten bro code unofficially stating friends can’t go out with each other’s ex-girlfriends. Then again, Norton is a small place—if everyone adhered to the rule, no one would date anyone else.

“Yeah, um, let me see if I have anything going on,” he told her, smiling ear to ear. Valerie tucked her blonde hair around her earlobe, smiling as she backed away. “That sounds awesome!” she elated. “Just let me know.” Devin nodded, watching her walk away with hands in her back jean pockets, rocking a purple off-the-shoulder sweater.

Devin danced his way back inside Melvin’s house and into his sight. “What’s wrong with ya? Ya look like you’re having a spasm—brain damaged even,” Craggs groaned. Nothing could ruin Devin’s enthusiasm, not even his crotchety old neighbor. “Let me guess. You like her,” Melvin summarized. “Tryin to escape the torture area? The friend zone dat is?” Devin stopped and looked at Melvin, fighting the need to tell him, duh.

“You mean her?” Devin pointed outside, “That beautiful angel who just came to your door just now. Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Liked her for a while then, have ya?” Melvin asked.

“How’d you know?” Devin replied.

“She asked for somethin’, and you fell over yourself to please her. Sounds like a crush if I ever saw one.” Devin became offended, iterating, “Her boyfriend just broke it off with her.” Melvin stopped and looked away, becoming uneasy. “You mean the Flanagan boy? I’d watch out for him if I was you. So much rage in dat family, in dat house even. He sees you with her, may go off the deep end. But maybe dat’s what she wants.”

“I don’t think you know enough to make that assumption,” Devin snapped.

“Oh, really? She just got dumped, and she came crawlin’ to you magically. Think I proved my point.”

“If anything was proven, it was that girls don’t like the rank smell of old cigars mixed with black mold! They have a type,” Devin shot back using quotation fingers. Melvin smiled with one side of his face, “If ya say so.” There was an awkward pause between the two, one young and naïve and the other old and full of cantankerous wisdom.

As crass as he was, Melvin Craggs was also a wealth of knowledge, something none of the neighbors knew anything about, which was a tragedy itself. He still had so much to offer the world but chose to remain a recluse over the years. Melvin gazed at his freshly cleaned and dusted mantle where his photos stand in antique frames.

“Who is that with you in those pictures?” Devin asked, burying the hatchet and providing an icebreaker. Melvin stood from his chair and



walked over to them. “Dat, boy, mah Sally, mah wife,” Melvin shared with sadness behind his eyes. Devin had never seen his wife, so he assumed something happened, just not sure what. He didn’t even have to ask. Melvin filled in the blanks for him.

“Came back from the war in ’45 and married her. We had been datin’ for a bit before I shipped out but came back and made sure she didn’t go nowhere. Had nine years together with her before she passed away.”

“Why did she die?” Devin asked.

“Polio. Got it in 1952, when da whole pandemic went on. It was hard on both of us. Her bein’ crippled was one thing, but she was some of the few where the disease affected the muscles. She suffocated in her sleep one night during the summer. Weren’t nothin’ I could do but watch her go. She just stared at me until her eyes closed. Always wondered if I gave her some kind of relief by being next to her. Maybe I’ll never know,” Melvin continued.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We had a good life together. Some years were better than others, and even with her needing a wheelchair, we ended on a real good one. Da real kicker was a year later when the cure was available. Dat’s what gets me the most. I can’t say I know much about people anymore, but if there is one thing I can tell you...people will say life is short, which it is, but it can also be long, especially if you don’t waste it like me. It’s the people who have regrets—the ones wishing for more time have the shortest days. So go and hang out with dat girl you like and just live. You never know how tings will turn out.”

His secret was out now.

Instead of laughing, Ryan’s friends decided to take the conversation indoors to the bottom floor of his house. All four stormed into the house through the front door and slid down the banister because, well, it’s what they did, except for Colin, who was unsure how safe it was. After being coerced, he finally slid down belly flat and reared outland, landing on his feet. After a short celebration, Ryan pulled a chalkboard out of the coat closet and scribbled some notes down.

Ryan had already told them what he saw when he went off after his mother while recovering from the mace burning their faces. He described how the gigantic wolf stood above the adults turned human as it was dying from Melvin Cragg’s shotgun blasting off its snout.

That was the easy part.

None of them could refute it since they weren't in the field, but they questioned it as any sane person would. What Ryan had to talk about next was probably the most uncomfortable he would be. Drawing with a worn down piece of pink chalk, Ryan wrote, The Suspects.

"Let's just pretend you ran into a werewolf, not a wolf...a werewolf. What does it matter now?" Scott asked.

"What kind of wolf was it?" Christina asked. Ryan put his board down onto his lap, curling his lip, not understanding what they were getting at. "What do you mean, what kind of wolf?"

"Are you talking like *American Werewolf in London* or *The Howling* type?" Colin helped clarify. Ryan, stupefied he knew those films, looked over to Colin and began to speak until Scott interrupted, asking what was on Ryan's mind. "How do you know anything about those movies?"

"Because I've seen them," Colin answered sarcastically. Wide-eyed, he shook his head with his mouth open to point out how dumb the question was. Uh-duh. "How? You have like a thousand kids in that place, and most of them are younger than you," Ryan added.

"I watched them with the older ones at night. It's fine! Nothing was bad in them," Colin assured his overconcerned friends, acting more like parents than buddies. Ryan scoffed and leaned forward, "What do ya mean there is nothing bad? One of them has a conversation in a porn theater, and the other has Elisabeth Brooks going full boobs and bush!"

"I bet he saw an edited version. Yeah, those blow," Scott nodded, understanding. Colin shrugged his shoulders, not fully understanding the difference between a movie on VHS and one on television or why. "What difference does it make? It was a freakin' werewolf!" Ryan nearly shouted loud enough that his mother could hear.

Christina put her finger in the air. All three boys shut up, hating she had power over them. She grinned, knowing her control, and proceeded to get to the point of the question. "Does it use all four legs, or just two?" Ryan went over all accounts of Halloween night he could remember. "Both, I guess. It was running on all fours when it bit into Eric, but it was standing when I got to the cornfield."

"Did Craggs have a silver bullet or something?" Scott interjected. Ryan rolled his eyes and pointed out a couple of things, "One. It was a shotgun,

so probably not. Second, thinking a bullet needs to be silver is dumb. How would a silver one go through a body any more than a regular one?"

"You ever see that flick? *Silver Bullet*?" Scott ignored Ryan, focusing on the other two.

"Yeah, it's the one with the vampires near the beach, right?" Colin asked.

"No. That's *Fright Night*. It's a vampire one," Christina wrongly stated.

"Uh-uh. That's the one with the vampire neighbor. *Lost Boys* is the vampires on the beach with an oiled-up saxophone guy with the big pecs. But the kid in that one was in *Silver Bullet*." Christina and Colin both realized the mistake and nodded, now understanding. "But he was in *Stand By Me* too, right?" Christina asked, continuing a conversation, attempting to remove Ryan's concerns.

Ryan, fed up with the conversation he would generally love to have, became frustrated and slammed his fist onto the blackboard, setting the movie facts straight. "Corey Haim was in *Silver Bullet* and *The Lost Boys*. The guy in *Stand by Me* is Corey Feldman, who was also in *The Lost Boys*, both of which, by the way, has *nothing to do with werewolves except for Silver Bullet!*"

"What's wrong?" Colin naively asked. Christina and Scott whispered about Corey Feldman now, trying to remember if he was in *Gremlins*, as Ryan shot them a look, bringing down the conversation.

"What's wrong is that I have werewolves on my mind, then you bring in vampires along with oiled up, beefy saxophone man, and now I'm all over the place! Can we please get back to the point? If you all don't mind!" Ryan sounded like a maniac towards the end, and all three backed away. "Let me get to my point!"

"Then what is it?" Scott asked slowly, attempting to calm Ryan down, growing tired of his initiated conversation. Then, taking the chalkboard into his hands, Ryan began scribbling names. His three friends raised their heads to see what he was writing. It didn't take long to finish his list before turning it over to reveal three names: Eric Flanagan, Valerie Donovan, and finally, the one they all were surprised to see, Calvin Hatcher, his father.

"I think one or more of them may have taken on a werewolf curse, and next week during full moons, they will change and hurt people."

Seeing his sister's name in pink, Scott frowned but couldn't imagine how Ryan felt, jotting his father's name. "You actually believe this, don't

you?” Christina asked, not finding the conversation fun anymore. Before, Christina believed it was a great story made up by Ryan because she had known him to be creative but never thought he would take it this far. Christy has never known him to be a liar either, making or embellishing stories. The only conclusion she could ascertain was her friend was going insane but knew Ryan well enough to know his beliefs were real. Ryan conveniently left out the part where he had seen ghosts. Convincing his friends that werewolves exist was one thing, but explaining the spirits in his home would have been too much, especially for Colin. He was still younger than they were.

Christina and Colin had nothing to say. What could they say? They saw their friend was at the tipping point, afraid to disagree or say anything to set him off more.

The names on Ryan’s list had nothing to do with Christina and Colin directly, but Scott, on the other hand, was confused as to why his sister was even thought of. Rubbing his temples, Scott moaned, “Please explain.” Ryan stood, sighed, and began to go over his thought process. “The simple answer is that these are the people I saw leave with scratches on their bodies after it was over. Eric is a given; he had the most damage to his body but miraculously recovered after a few days in the hospital. I mean, c’mon! You have to admit it’s weird.” Ryan’s friends nodded, agreeing why he would be the main suspect.

“Your sister had cuts on her leggings over her thigh. I saw some blood come from them.” Scott immediately responded, “But that doesn’t mean a wolf cut her open.” Ryan nodded his head, agreeing, “True. The cuts in her outfit looked like claw marks, but it could have been something else. Sure. A thorn bush or something.” Ryan believed what he said, but the markings looked too much like an animal swiped at Valerie for him not to conclude.

“What about your dad? Why him?” Colin chimed in.

“I saw him with cuts on his arm before I walked Valerie back to our house,” Ryan answered. “He also has changed. He doesn’t look the same.”

“What? Does he look bad? I haven’t seen him too much,” Christina asked. Ryan began shaking his head, “Not at all. He looks good, but it has all happened in such a small amount of time. The cuts he said were from a thorn bush healed quick, and he’s lost a dramatic amount of weight.”

“Maybe he’s been watchin’ what he eats. If he stopped drinking, the weight could just fall off. Saw that on Donahue one day,” Christina

rationalized. Ryan sat back down into the old plaid chair and thought about what he was insinuating—his father becoming a monster in less than a week. “I shouldn’t have said anything,” he admitted.

Christina stood and walked over to Ryan and sat next to him on the chair’s arm. He couldn’t look at her face, embarrassed he said anything about Halloween night. She wrapped her arms around him from the side to let him know it was all right. “Can you guys come Saturday and just kind of, well, spy on him? My dad is supposed to be rebuilding the shed that day for whatever reason.” Ryan knew some of the reason—it was a dilapidated building that could give someone hepatitis if they rubbed against the cracked and splintered wood the wrong way.

“Usually, people do that in the spring or summertime. Why now?” Scott asked, perplexed on why such an enormous task couldn’t wait.

“Yeah! Exactly what I’m thinkin’,” Ryan answered.

Evening came, and Ryan’s friends rode or walked home as Devin finished his work at Melvin Cragg’s house, full of different emotions. He was ecstatic his crush had asked him to a party. On the other hand, he felt anxiety about going out with Valerie so soon after ending things with Eric.

Calvin sat downstairs watching channel seven, one of the three channels clear enough to come through, when Devin walked in from the garage. They both exchanged looks, not knowing what to say to one another. His father thought about speaking up, to try and exchange pleasantries. When Devin began making his way upstairs, he decided it wasn’t the right time.

“You missed dinner,” his mother told him. “Leftovers are in the fridge.” Then, changing his trajectory, Devin turned to the kitchen to find his mom washing dishes. Her shoulder blades protruded through her denim button-up shirt every time she brought back her arm when she scrubbed the pans.

Rebecca felt her eldest son’s arms come from behind and over her shoulders, hugging her. “I’m sorry I’m such a little shit sometimes,” Devin told his mom. She smiled and patted his arm, appreciating the gesture. “You’re a teenage boy. It’s what ya do. I forgive you as soon as it happens because I know you’re a good lad.”

She turned to find her son, confused and lonely. “What is it? What’s the matta?” she asked her son. Devin leaned against the counter and answered, “I don’t know. Something seems off. People are acting strange. Even Layla is being, well, reserved is the word, I suppose. Everything is different.” Rebecca nodded, understanding what her son was saying.

“Yeah, but it happens. It will happen. Different doesn’t have to mean bad, though, does it? It just means different.” Devin shook his head, “No. I suppose not.” An uncomfortable silence came between them, knowing what needed to be discussed.

“You need to give your father a break,” Rebecca told Devin bluntly, the only way she knew how. Devin looked away, wanting to cave in and agree. Still, the stubbornness, and rebellious way he got from both parents, made him refuse. “No, mom, I really don’t. I’ll be out of here in a little over a year, and Ryan and Layla will have to suffer through his bullshit.” Rebecca threw a dish towel she had been using onto the counter.

“He’s a good man, your dad. People just lose their way sometimes,” she reminded.

“Maybe. Or some men never change no matter what.”

Rebecca glanced at her son, creating a hypothesis. “If you think about it, if you think your father was bad, you wouldn’t be so gung ho about leaving.” Devin cut his eyes towards her, not liking where she was going with her train of thought. “Explain.”

“I think you think he’s okay, or you wouldn’t feel comfortable leaving him here with your brother and sister whenever you go off to college or move out. Don’t pretend it’s about ‘dem to further your point,” she explained. Devin had nothing to say other than to scoff. “I think because there is no one on this Earth you can hate for my cancer, you are taking a bad moment you saw between your folks and putting your frustration towards your father more than you should.” Devin didn’t argue for once. He couldn’t think of a rebuttal to dispute it. Delighted with herself, Rebecca giggled, “That’s very astute of me, ain’t it? What do they call that?”

“Projecting?” Devin questioned.

“Maybe.”

Devin’s feelings began to show. He moved his face away, trying to fight back whatever was coming. “I don’t (*sniff*) want you to go anywhere,” Devin mumbled, battling the pain in his face from holding back his tears as his words became challenging to comprehend. Rebecca walked over, ran her hands through his hair, and told him, “Oh, my baby boy. Please don’t feel bad for yourself or me. I will get to see the great things you will do and the man you will be. I can’t do that held up in a bed, in pain. I will be around, just not the way you think I should, that’s all.” Rebecca hugged her

son longer than she had ever since he was twelve as his tears soaked into her shirt.

“Do you believe that?” Devin questioned.

“I do, even if ya don’t. I can have enough faith for both of us. Fair?” Devin moved from his mother gaze, slightly embarrassed. “Please give ya dad a break—it wasn’t him,” Rebecca asked before her son left the kitchen. Devin tightened his lips and gave his mother a pitiful smile before walking away toward his room.

Devin saw his brother outside Layla’s room when he came around the corner, watching her door. “What are you doing?” Devin asked. Ryan put his finger up to his lip, telling his brother to be quiet.

They saw four dolls sitting upright in her room inside their sister’s bedroom—a couple by her bed, some near her dresser, some baby dolls, and other stuffed animals. Layla walked out of her room, closing the door behind her, then staring at it before acknowledging her brothers standing near. “Hello, gents,” she quipped before moving on with her mission.

Both Devin and Ryan looked at one another and shrugged. “I don’t know man. She’s your sister,” Devin said, jesting she was not related to him because she was so *weird*. They chalked it up to nothing more than his sister just being herself, but Ryan stayed to see what his little sister did next.

Layla gazed at the front door as she descended the stairs in front of her. She took one step at a time, reaching for the doorknob. The front door lightly squealed, crackling open as she looked back at her bedroom door. She then closed it, ran back up the stairs, and entered her room to find her doll with shutting eyelids, when laid flat, had fallen over. “That’s not the right way,” she whispered to herself. Ryan watched his sister sit her doll back up and exit her room, closing the door again.

Layla descended the stairs again, this time reaching the bottom floor. Ryan stayed back but heard her footsteps heading towards the garage. “What are you doing, Layloo?” he heard his father inquire.

“Nothing,” she replied with her sweet voice.

“Alright. Why don’t you go up to bed, sweetie! Don’t let the Tickle Man come out. You know how it can take me over.” Calvin chuckled, and Layla giggled, agreeing. As she hopped back up the stairs, she glanced at Ryan when she reached the top.

“What are you doing exactly?” Ryan inquired.

“Playing a game,” Layla answered. Intrigued, he asked, “What’s the game?” Layla twisted her mouth, unsure of how to explain it. “I have to find the right exit. The dolls fall over if I don’t. No dolly falls if I pick the right one,” she began, referring to her dolls and stuffed animals. “If I pick a wrong one, then one, maybe more fall over. If I pick the worst one, then they all fall over.” Ryan was relatively sure he understood the game.

Layla opened her door to go to bed but stopped before entering, looking at the floor. Ryan poked his head around the side to see three of the four dolls had fallen over. “What does that mean?” Ryan asked his little sister.

“It means I picked a really bad exit.”

Ryan knelt and looked up at his sister, contemplating asking what he had been avoiding for so long. “You see them, don’t you?” Layla nodded her head.

“How often?”

“The one in the pink dress mostly, the one looking for her kitty. She tells me things—shows me where to go. The others stand in one place or just stand, and some make a quick move, like putting their arms out. One of them is standing behind you now.”

Ryan slowly turned towards the hall and fell to his knees, bringing Layla along. Another dark presence lurked in their hallway at night. He didn’t know if it was the same from the yard or a different one. The jogger was the first he had ever seen, but now he only saw him in front of the blue spruce.

A man’s head emerged backward from behind the wall next to the other closet across from Layla’s room, next to the stairs. He was a balding man, looking down at the ground as the rest of him floated into the hall. The man kept looking at the floor, dressed in a bloody button-up shirt, tie, and torn slacks. His hands began to twitch as he brought them to his chin, lifting his head, revealing most of his neck had been gnawed away. *He had to look down. There’s hardly anything holding his head up.*

The man’s face was blue, drained of blood, as he tried to talk with one side of his jaw hanging from his face. The poor, deceased man reached out to Layla’s door only for it to slam, alerting their mother in the kitchen. Ryan shut his eyes tightly and clung to his sister, fearing something would take her away. The entity shrieked through its open throat, allowing the juices and puss to leak down his suit. Every door in the house slammed shut,



causing Layla to yelp. It was the only time she honestly thought she would be hurt by the spirits in her home.

Rebecca rushed out of the kitchen; her voice laced with concern. "What the hell is happenin'? What's all the noise fer?" Ryan hastily rose to his feet, his eyes still shut tight, a fake smile plastered on his face. "Nothing, Mom. We were just playing a game."

"Well, stop slamming doors then! You're gonna give me a damn heart attack. Get ready for bed, Layla," she ordered, her tone firm. Layla quickly agreed, wiping away the tears before their mother intervened.

As soon as her mother left the room, Layla leaned in close, her voice barely above a whisper. "She doesn't like leaving the room most of the time. I think the man is her dad. He looks for her over and over again every night, like they're rehearsing a play. He just stands outside my room, in front of the hall, blocking the way to the other bedrooms."

Ryan nodded, a sinking feeling in his chest. He feared he knew exactly what she meant. *God, I hope it's not what I think.* The recent animal attacks claimed two lives—a father and a daughter. *I don't think it's a coincidence. It can't be,* Ryan thought, troubled by the connection.

Layla opened the door to her room, finding her dolls arranged on her bed. It was her way of telling Layla it was time to sleep. Her brother lingered by the door, peering into the dimly lit room. He caught sight of the red headed girl cowering behind Layla's dresser, afraid to come out until the door was fully shut. "When it begins, they can't show us the way anymore. That's what she says," Layla whispered, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

Ryan heard her loud and clear.

Rebecca neared the end of cleaning her kitchen when a sudden sense of dread washed over her. It was a feeling she had experienced many times before, a chilling sensation accompanying their presence. Glancing up from her freshly cleaned counter, she noticed dark figures looming behind her in the reflection of the window. Without flinching, Rebecca lowered her gaze, unwilling to count their number.

"I know you're there," she stated firmly, her fingers gliding nervously across the drawer handles near her abdomen. "I don't know what you want, but if you're here for evil, I cast you out! You are not welcome, and you must leave." With a quick glance back at the window, she found her kitchen table, relieved to see the figures had vanished. Rebecca had commanded

them to depart, though she couldn't be certain if they were capable of doing so. *Maybe it has nothing to do with wickedness*, she thought.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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# HEAD OVER HEELS

It was about eleven in the morning when the telephone rang on Thanksgiving Day, signaling another requested presence on the phone for Ryan. Calvin entered his room, lifted his legs by the ankles, and playfully smacked him on the bottom, reminiscent of the Foghorn Leghorn cartoons with the dog. Such antics were not uncommon in the Hatcher household, as Calvin found it amusing to tease his kids over the years.

The Hatchers hadn't upgraded to a portable phone yet, relying instead on either the cream colored rotary phone in the kitchen or the regular brown one downstairs. Ryan preferred the downstairs phone for its privacy. He dragged himself out of bed, groaning as he made his way to the door. The aroma of coffee and strawberry Pop-Tarts filled the air, but Ryan had no appetite. He hadn't felt hungry for the past few days.

Barely producing the word 'hello,' tired from being alert the night before, Ryan answered the phone. He had ghosts in his house but couldn't understand why. Maybe he didn't need to know. "Good morning!" came the sweet, familiar voice on the other end. It took a moment for Ryan to realize it was Christina. "Hey, Christy?"

"Of course it's me. Who else would it be?" Christina replied with faux offense, lightening Ryan's mood with her banter. She helped wake him up a bit more with her cheerful voice. "I caught you while you were still asleep, didn't I?" Ryan nodded, not realizing he needed to speak. "Yeah, but that's okay. I need to get up anyway." Ryan remembered Christina wasn't supposed to be in town. "Where are you?"

There was a long pause, unusual for Christina, who loved to chit chat on the phone. "Plans didn't work out," she finally said.

"So you didn't get to go to South Carolina to see your cousins and all that?" Ryan asked.

"No. My parents decided to go somewhere else, by themselves," Christina replied with a hint of disappointment.

"Do you want me to come over? No, wait. What are your grandparents going to do today?"

"Um, to be honest, I don't know. I don't think they made plans because I was supposed to be gone," Christina admitted. Ryan had an idea and asked if he could call her back. She agreed, and Ryan rushed upstairs to ask his mother if Christina and her grandparents could come over for Thanksgiving. Rebecca didn't hesitate to agree, as Calvin had gone overboard with the food shopping the night before. "There's more than enough," she assured Ryan, excited to have company.

Ryan hurried back downstairs and called Christina. She answered confidently, expecting his call. "Hello, Ryan," she greeted.

"What if that wasn't me calling?" Ryan teased.

"Then I wasted my sexy voice on a total stranger or one of my family members. Yeah, that could have been really gross," Christina realized. They both snickered before Ryan properly invited her and her family to dinner around four-ish. "It won't be normal, just to warn you. It's Kentucky Fried Chicken with a metric shit ton of sides," he explained. The kids didn't enjoy traditional Thanksgiving dishes like many others, finding turkey tasted like paper. To Ryan, if you had to put gravy and stuffing with something to make it taste good, it wasn't worth it in the first place. "I'll ask and let you know," she replied. They said goodbye, and Ryan waited patiently for the phone to ring again.

It didn't take long.

Ryan eagerly lifted the receiver from its base, anticipating the response. *Maybe some alone time would be nice*, he thought as he waited for the call. "They said that would be nice, so I guess we will be there around four!" Christina exclaimed with excitement from the other end of the line. Ryan mirrored her enthusiasm and ended the call, but not before engaging in their playful "couples game" of "You hang up... no, you hang up— you didn't hang up either!" The game made others cringe whenever they heard new couples do it. Still, Ryan and Christina found it endearing, even though they weren't technically a couple.

Time seemed to drag on as Ryan and Devin sat watching the Minnesota Vikings take on the Houston Oilers with their father. Their mother had banished them from the kitchen so she could focus on making desserts and attempting to teach Layla how to bake. Calvin, on the other hand, was restless, his leg bouncing with pent up energy, eager to tackle a task like replacing the shed's wood sides in the backyard. Putting up the panels one

by one wasn't overly complex, but the thought of organizing the interior filled him with apprehension.

Neither brother relished being there; Thanksgiving always seemed to be the duller day of the year. Devin occupied himself with his portable Coleco Donkey Kong game while Ryan awaited Christina's arrival. The clatter of pots and pans from the kitchen above left the men wondering what culinary creations were underway.

"I need your help with the shed tomorrow," Calvin directed at Devin. Cutting a disdainful glance at his father, Devin retorted, "Can't. I'm still helping Melvin with his house." Calvin's incredulous glare pierced Devin, unable to fathom why his son would choose to work for someone else over his own father. "Can't you go another time? Didn't he give you a deadline?"

"Nope, and yep. Supposed to be today, but couldn't get the shit hole clean in time," Devin replied bluntly.

"I need this done Sunday," Calvin pleaded.

"That sounds like a you problem," Devin shot back.

Calvin chewed his upper lip, struggling to contain his anger. Rising abruptly from his seat, he loomed over Devin and Ryan. Ryan instinctively shrank into the corner of the couch, unwilling to intervene, observing his father's visage contort in a manner he'd never witnessed before, marked by a deep scowl and clenched teeth. While their father had shown moments of frustration towards them, he'd never displayed anger like this. Summoning all his courage, Devin stood tall, prepared for whatever consequences awaited him—secretly hoping for an excuse to avoid his father altogether.

"Do it," Devin taunted. "I dare you."

He sensed his son's resentment, pleading, "Please don't test me." Devin sidestepped from Calvin, making his way up the stairs and back to his room. "I just wanted some time with you, you know? That's all. You don't have to be a little shit about it," Calvin said with genuine sincerity. Devin paused midway up the stairwell to listen.

"I don't understand why I'm so terrible. Why choose old man Craggs over your dad?" Calvin pressed on.

"You know why. And what difference does it make? Get Ryan to help," Devin raised his voice.

"Because you're my goddamn son, not his!"

A heavy silence descended upon the house. The blender upstairs ceased its whirring, and the faint sound of air passing through the cracks of the old

windows permeated the silence. Devin harbored countless thoughts he wished to articulate but had no desire to engage in a shouting match with everyone at home. It could wait for another day. With resolve, he ascended the stairs past his mother who heard the argument.

"What da hell was that?" Rebecca whispered as Calvin returned to his chair and settled in to watch the game. Ryan couldn't help but observe his father, noting how his body seemed to swell with anger before returning to its normal size. It didn't mean he was turning into a wolf, but the possibility lingered in his mind. Parents always seemed larger when they were angry, but he had never seen anyone so furious before. If his father's rage was any indication of how he might change, Ryan finally understood what fear truly meant.

The doorbell rang, jolting Ryan out of his thoughts. He sprang to his feet, momentarily forgetting the argument, and dashed up the stairs to answer it. His excitement waned when he realized Layla had beaten him to it. She had wanted Christina all to herself, to play with her *dollys* in her room. He recognized her game and was *gonna play it*, not letting her have her way this time. As he approached her, Layla turned around with a mischievous grin, silently warning Ryan to back off.

Layla opened the door to find Christina with her curly blonde hair, wearing a black coat over a red dress with black pantyhose, accompanied by her grandparents, Jo and Carl. Ryan had always liked Christina's grandparents; they were always kind to him. He became accustomed to calling them grandma and grandpa. They were dressed quite elegantly compared to the Hatchers. The boys wore jeans and long sleeved t-shirts, while Cal sported a nice polo and Rebecca wore a blouse. Layla, as usual, wore one of her many dresses, aiming to outshine everyone else.

Pleasantries were exchanged, with introductions made just in case anyone had forgotten. It was mainly the men who needed to introduce themselves, as Rebecca and Jo had spoken many times before. Jo hugged Rebecca with tears in her eyes; she hadn't seen her since her cancer diagnosis. Rebecca looked different from the person Jo remembered, thinner with her cheekbones showing through thinning skin. "The poor dear," Jo said to herself as she took off her coat, making sure Rebecca couldn't hear.

They all gathered around the kitchen table, where the adults took up most of the space. The kids decided to stand to eat around the kitchen,



eventually migrating to the family room, where they sat and conversed. Everyone enjoyed the Colonel's original recipe chicken and the plethora of sides: mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, green beans, and potato wedges for those who wanted to double down on the carbs. The adults discussed various topics, while the kids talked about entertainment, mainly music and movies, with a bit of school gossip thrown in.

Rebecca quickly realized she and Calvin had not shared their plans for the following week with their kids. "Hey, guys!" she called out across the room. Despite her fragile appearance, she still had a booming voice. "Come here for a sec. We need to tell you somethin'." They groaned as they put down their plates, knowing standing would be difficult with their bellies full.

"Next week, your dad and I will be out for a bit," Rebecca explained. It was rare for them to go out by themselves, let alone for multiple days. "What do you mean?" Devin asked, confused by the notion his parents would want some time to themselves.

"On Tuesday, we'll be going to Cleveland for the Philharmonic Orchestra holiday concert. We'll stay overnight," Rebecca began before Calvin interjected, "That one was your mother's idea."

"Anyway, we'll stay there through Wednesday, come home Thursday morning, and then we are going to a party that night some people from your father's work are throwing."

Ryan's ears perked up. The dates mentioned seemed familiar for other reasons, but at the time, he had no clue as to why. "That's kind of weird," Devin pointed out. It was unusual for them, but when time is limited, one must make the most of what remains.

"I'm sorry if your father and I want to be alone, away from you kids. God forbid!" Rebecca said sarcastically. The adults laughed while the kids wondered what they could do without them.

*Ew, yuck...blech!*

"Devin's in charge. I'm trusting you all with this. No parties, don't burn the house down, be civil," Calvin pointed to his kids, even Layla, who looked offended at the notion she could be a troublemaker.

"You know," Jo interjected, "they could come with us to the Fall Festival. We're going on Wednesday, so if you all want to tag along." Christina turned her head towards Ryan, wondering if he would say yes. Ryan nodded and answered, "We'll see," instead. He was bothered by all

this, and Christina knew it. Concerned, she would get him alone later to ask what could make him not want to go with her. Ryan quickly realized Colin was planning on going to the festival the same day with his foster siblings.

Layla watched her brother sit back on the couch, putting his plate on the table next to him. She also had an inkling something was amiss. Layla knew she did not know much about life but knew when her usually laid back brother was tense; she had seen it for several days. Ryan felt someone gawking at him and turned his head to his sister. They watched one another, knowing they needed to talk, *but how do you open up a conversation with a child about something nobody else believes?*

The wine glasses continued to fill as the parents clucked on more and more. Ryan threw his trash in the bin, already overflowing. He was still too young to join in adult conversation. Devin had no interest, so they went their separate ways as Christina joined Ryan outside.

A bit of rain was coming down during their dinner, dampening the ground and making it hard to find a dry spot outside to sit and talk. Nevertheless, the pair made their way down the stairs, passing Calvin and Carl, both passed out on the chair and sofa as the Lions and Cowboys played. Christina walked alongside Ryan as they made their way to the shed his father would fix starting tomorrow. They managed to move the chopped wood Calvin kept behind the shed to use in their fire pit so they could sit comfortably without their rear ends becoming too damp.

Ryan had to get out of his head. He looked over at Christina, looking lovely despite the wetness outside. He couldn't explain it, but the dreary cold weather suited her. Unsure if it was because of her sense of style during the cold months or her pale skin—Christina was beautiful to him. This moment would be embedded in his memories forever as the colored leaves from the woods added the color needed against her black coat. It didn't help her admittance of romantic feelings towards him gave Ryan a warm fuzzy feeling when she was around.

"I'm sorry you couldn't go down South with your folks," Ryan told her, knowing he needed to focus less on his anxieties and more on her. "Yeah, well, I shouldn't have been too surprised. It's not like they haven't made plans and canceled on me before," she told him. He nodded and sighed, not knowing how to make her feel better. Christina didn't need him to say anything; she just needed him to be there.

"What happened? I know it's not really none of my business, but we've known each other for a long time, but I've always wondered but didn't want you to hate me for asking." Amazed Ryan had taken so long to ask about her parents, Christina looked away, blowing cold air from her mouth. "I could never hate you," she told him. She shifted her body around to get comfortable on her woodpile before speaking.

"So, my parents were drug addicts when I was born, and after. There was a lot of abuse from both. They would yell at each other, beating one another, and it wasn't an uneven fight. They both held their own, from what I remember. When I was four, about a year before you met me, I was sent to live with my grandparents."

"That sucks. Did they ever get better?" Ryan asked. Christina took a deep breath because she knew this next part would be hard to get through.

"Yeah. They got better, I think. I mean, my parents say they are. I don't know. Why haven't I gone back to them if they were, you know? Why am I still living with my grandma and grandpa? I thought they would want to have me, but they don't." Her nose began to run as her eyes swelled, fighting back the tears. "We always make plans, ya know? But it is always something most of the time. I go with them on weekends around town, but nothing that really matters." Ryan nodded his head, understanding her heartbreaking emotions.

"But I matter, don't I? They were the ones hurting themselves and each other, but it's like I'm the one they are afraid of. I think they hate me. They do. They hate me! I'm the reason they fought!" Christina sobbed into her black fabric gloves, hiding her face from Ryan. He had never seen her cry before, not like this.

It was the first time he needed to comfort someone who wasn't his own family. He gently put his left arm around her while she cried, not knowing if she wanted to be touched. Christina moved into the pit of his arm, unknowingly wiping her nose against his sleeve. These next words need to mean something. *I need to be articulate now*, Ryan thought, searching for what to say. *What I say and what I mean always seem to disagree.*

"I don't know your parents. They always give me a dirty look when I saw them." Christina chuckled against her sobs. "But I don't think they hate you. I think, maybe, they're ashamed. Maybe they might hate themselves? They don't know who you are now because they missed out on the best parts, ya know? That's on them. I'm afraid to tell you, but you are not

someone anybody can hate," Ryan explained before ending his articulate thought, "It's impossible!"

Christina looked up at Ryan, her face stained by tears and a runny nose. If he didn't know better, which he didn't, Ryan thought she wanted him to kiss her. He moved his face towards hers, then hesitated. *Not now. It's not the right moment.* He watched her beautiful face draw closer, but he froze, unsure of what to do next.

Closing his eyes, unsure of himself as always, Ryan opened them again to find Christina in the same position, paler than before. Pulling back his head, Ryan looked into her partially opened mouth and saw grey teeth. Blood trickled from four gashes on her forehead. Christina's wide, frightening smile began to disappear as the wounds grew longer, her flesh tearing apart. She began to frown, her mouth opening unnaturally wider. Ryan peered into the dark void of her mouth, where teeth, tongue, and flesh were absent. Only a black void remained, as the wounds on her face bled profusely, cascading down her body. Chunks of flesh fell away, revealing claw marks beneath.

In Ryan's arms, Christina's face and body disintegrated, blown away by the wind, leaving only ash in his hands and on his clothes. A black shadow appeared, kneeling at his level, its dark eyes staring at him. Before he could scream for help, the entity, with blood-stained teeth, yelled at him in Christina's voice, "Why did you let me die!"

Ryan brought clenched fists to his eyes, ready to wake himself from the nightmare. Instead, warm hands touched his knuckles, frightening him. Pushing from the being, Ryan fell from the woodpile. There was no reason to be afraid. Feeling Christina's touch again, he struggled to calm himself.

Wiping his eyes with his sleeve to remove what he thought were human remains, Ryan heard Christina's sweet concern, asking, "What happened? What is it? What's wrong, Ryan?" He reached out for her, trying to find someone real to bring him back from his vision.

"What happened? What's wrong?" Christina asked again, now with a calming voice, kneeling beside Ryan. There were no shadows, spirits, ghosts, or whatever you want to call them. All Ryan saw was the dilapidated shed and Christina looking down at him, *with those big eyes*, concerned. He took her hand and stood on his feet, realizing it was hard for him to breathe. "You could have just told me you didn't want to be near me," she joked, masking her concern. Ryan walked out from behind the

shed with Christina, attempting to explain without sounding more insane than he already did. *Werewolves are one thing, but adding ghosts into it is over the line.*

“I’ve been having these dreams lately, maybe visions. I’m not sure what to call it. They just happen out of nowhere. They last for a few moments, then reality comes back.” Christina rubbed her chin, pondering. “Well, there is one explanation—you are cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.” Trying to lighten the mood, Ryan quipped nervously, “Is there a pill I can take for that?”

Christina’s demeanor changed because she knew Ryan’s mental stability was becoming a concern. “It sounds like something I heard on a show on PBS. Sleep paralysis.” Ryan couldn’t wrap his head around the concept. “But I’m not asleep.” At least, he didn’t think he was.

“Sure, but you told us you haven’t been sleeping well. What if you are nodding off?”

“Would it come on that quick?” Ryan asked, half expecting a correct answer. Christina looked up, thinking back to what she had learned. “I don’t think so.”

Ryan threw his arms in the air and claimed temporary defeat, “Then I am either a lost cause or a weirdo. Probably both!” The wind gusted heavily, and Christina’s hair blew in front of her face, covering her mouth and forehead. Her big eyes stared at Ryan, *those lovely eyes*, smiling under it all. She lightly pulled her nearly white, blonde hair from her face and joked, “Let’s just go with weirdo. I can work with that. Lost cause means we should just give up.”

Christina looked above Ryan’s head towards his house. Ryan turned his head and saw Layla staring at them in the yard, not blinking or waving hello like she usually would when she saw Christina. Layla looked past the couple and put her attention on the shed. The ginger girl who visited Layla poked her head out from behind and glared at her. She scuttled behind the shed to hide like a crab, jerking her arms and cracking her neck, frightening Layla. She never saw the girl in the dress move so unnaturally. *That scares me!*, Layla thought, *please don’t do that again.*

“Yeah. Something is definitely off,” Ryan sighed. He was becoming convinced the entities in his home were demons tormenting him. They were there with Colin’s family, possessing the children in his vision and now the disturbing image of Christina crumbling between his fingers. What are they doing? What’s the point? Are they trying to say something?

“Why did you look so, I don’t know, concerned when your parents told you they would be gone a few days next week?” Christina wondered about it off and on since dinner, unable to think of a reason. Ryan looked towards his house, ready to go all in with his probable delusions, and with as serious an expression as Christina had ever seen him make, he answered:

“Because—those are the days the full moon will appear.”



# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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# EVERYWHERE

Ryan opened his eyes to find another staring at him the next day. Rebecca had gotten down onto the floor, poking her head up, only revealing the top of her nose and upwards. It's the feeling people gets when they know they're being watched by someone or something, but he never expected it to be so close to his face. He opened his eyes intensely and found his mother's eyes, wide and wrinkled underneath and crow's feet more apparent than ever. She was smiling, hiding it beside the mattress where Ryan couldn't see.

"Jesus Christ!" he shrieked as his body flung towards the wall. His mother stood up, laughing hard. It was the first time he had seen his mother feel well enough to laugh in quite some time. Her cancer made it hard for her to laugh even if she wanted to. It hurt her most times, but not right now. *I'll take what I can get.*

"What is wrong with you people and waking me up in the morning? You're as bad as dad!" Ryan pointed out, catching his breath. He looked around his room and noticed the sun had not risen yet. "What time is it?"

"It's about six o'clock. I need you to get moving and watch the blasphemy," Rebecca playfully demanded. Ryan rubbed his eyes, curled his lip, and snottily asked, "Why?" With a sly grin, Rebecca responded, "It's the day after Thanksgiving. We are going shopping!"

Falling over, groaning into his pillow, Ryan mumbled, "Why do I have to go?" Rebecca opened up his closet to find a shirt for him to wear like she used to when he was in elementary school. She was met with filthy clothes strewn on the floor and not in the hamper. "Ryan Hatcher, I swear!"

Trying to make his mom laugh, Ryan responded, "You shouldn't. It's not very nice."

Rebecca picked up Ryan's dirty clothes and gave him an unamused look. "You're going because I invited your friends to come with us. It will be fun, I promise." Confused, Ryan asked, "Who did you invite?"

"You know, the usual rogue's gallery of mates; Scott, Colin, and Christina," she smiled. "Oh, and your sister."

“How are you going to fit all of us in the Turbo?” Ryan wondered, getting out of bed to help with the clothes on the floor. “Just put Layloo on one of your laps. It’s just down the street,” she answered.

“What if you get caught?” a concerned Ryan asked, always worried about being stopped by the cops.

“What are they going to do? Put me in jail? I’ll be dead before I get a court date,” Rebecca said, not realizing to whom she was talking. Ryan shook his head and opened his mouth to yell. Instead, he replied, “That’s not funny.” He dropped the clothes and walked out of his room, leaving his mother not knowing what to say. Rebecca thought it best to leave it be and focus on the day she had planned for Layla, Ryan, and his friends.

The other teenagers walked over to The Hatcher’s house, except for Colin, who had ridden his quasi-new bike. Rebecca pointed to the cycle as he came down the driveway, “Hey! I recognize that thing!” Rebecca playfully yelled. All four stood around the garage, waiting for Rebecca to give the signal to hop in. Christina was the first to end the awkward silence.

“So. Why are we all going to the mall today? And why did your mom want us all to come?” she asked Ryan. He shrugged his shoulders with a half-smile, explaining, “I’ve learned over time to never question or understand. Just do what Rebecca Hatcher wants, and everything will be fine.” Scott nodded in agreement as Colin hung on to every spoken word. Christina pouted her lip and replied, “Fair enough.”

They all packed into the car uncomfortably and headed to the Rolling Acres Mall a few minutes later after Rebecca snapped her fingers and shouted, “Let’s go!” As they struggled to fit in the car, Scott had to ask, “What are we doing first?” He never had any qualms about being the one to ask about the day’s schedule, especially if free food was involved. “Well, I thought we would do an early lunch first,” Rebecca answered, looking at Scott in her rearview mirror. Scott pouted his lip and nodded, liking the idea, waiting for her to look away to do a quiet fist pump. “Then what?”

“You’ll just have to see,” Rebecca answered mysteriously.

The Rolling Acres parking lot was packed. Ryan never understood why people felt the need to go out on Black Friday—it’s crowded, and people are rude. That and he was highly claustrophobic when it came to overcrowded areas. All six squeezed out of the car and made their way to the mall’s front entrance on an unseasonably warm day. Realizing they all would be hot inside the mall; they threw their coats and jackets into the

back seat. Ryan looked out onto the main road and across the street at all the businesses lined up along Romig Road. They all lived close to one of the largest shopping areas in Akron, but they didn't know they would be the kings and queens of it for the day, except for Layla—she had to be a princess.

Layla stared at the large water fountain whenever she came to the mall. The large pillars spewing water from the tops always fascinated her. Rebecca reached into her purse and gave each of them a nickel to throw into it. "Make a wish," she told the kids, and they all did. Ryan flicked the coin from the bottom with his thumb, watching it ricochet off the red tiered tiles surrounding the pillars of cascading water. Layla and Colin threw theirs in like they were pitching in the World Series. Scott aimed his coin, attempting to get it on one of the pillars creating a waterfall resembling Nakatomi Plaza from *Die Hard*, his new favorite movie.

Christina took a moment and watched all the other children walking around the fountain, illuminated by the glass roof above decorative scaffolding. Before throwing nickel underhanded, Christy mouthed her wish, hoping no one heard because then it wouldn't come true. The coin made it onto the second tier of bright red tiles. Content with herself, Christina nodded to Rebecca and stood next to her, and Layla followed, like usual.

It was off to eat at The Picnic Place Food Court to pick a meal from several eateries or a mix of them if someone was so bold. Scott, Colin, and Christina searched around in their wallets and purse. They knew they didn't have enough money to buy their lunch as if a magical money fairy had just put several dollars in their pockets and bags. Rebecca shook her head, wondering if the tactic of acting dumb worked on anyone who wasn't already going to buy their food. "It's fine, you lot. I got it. Just tell me what ya want."

Colin and Christina decided on Orange Julius and their signature drink with a hot dog as their meal. Colin had the Pepperoni Cheese Dog, and Christina devoured a Bacon Cheese Dog like she hadn't been fed in days. Scott wandered over to the Philly Steak eatery for two reasons: One, he thought it was delicious. Two, it gave him horrific gas, and he knew they would all have to be together so he could let a ripe one fly—so stout wallpaper could peel from walls. The idea of the other kids choking on his fart made him laugh—Yes, Scott Donovan was *that* kid.

The Hatcher clan made it over to Sbarro to get a slice of their New York style pizza with a side of pasta salad. The kids preferred the Pepperoni, while Rebecca was fond of the sausage. She didn't desire big meals anymore, but she had a better appetite today, so she got a giant meatball.

Rebecca sat back and watched the kids take the ends of their straw covers and blow them towards one another, laughing and getting along. Ryan and Layla were relieved not to be in a house where spirits linger, even if only for a little while. The fun was just beginning for them.

Meanwhile, Devin was getting ready to do some final work on Mr. Cragg's home. He decided not to shower, figuring he would sweat and stink anyways. Around noon, Devin walked into the kitchen to find his father sitting, unsure, looking down at the table. The house felt empty without Rebecca there, and Calvin wondered how he would handle it when she was no longer around.

It was hard for Devin to imagine his mother not around anymore either, but he never thought of what it would be like to lose a spouse. His anger towards his father clouded any sympathy he could have for him.

"Are you going to do anything productive today or just let psoriasis of the liver set in a little more?" Devin hatefully asked, not caring about the consequence. Calvin sucked in his teeth, deciding to play his son's game. "I stopped drinking, but maybe it is already lingering there." Devin shook his head slightly, rolling his eyes, not expecting his dad to answer. He wouldn't admit it, but he wanted confrontation.

"You going next door again?"

"Yeah, a couple of more days, and I think I'll be done," Devin predicted as he looked for his coat.

Calvin stood up to walk toward Devin to talk to him. Devin saw his father coming over, but not the man he once knew physically. Calvin stood straighter, and his head was full of hair now. His shirts began to fit better than before; they didn't rise when he sat and drank in front of the television.

"Can we talk civilly, like men?" his father asked. Devin breathed in deep, knowing the conversation would have happened sooner or later. "Fine. Let's talk. What should we discuss?" Devin said with sarcasm.

"Oh! I know! Let's talk about how you beat mom that night."

"Here's money for each of ya," Rebecca said, handing out envelopes. "Do whatever you want with it. Spend it. Keep it. It doesn't matter to me. Just have fun today." Each of the kids looked inside their envelopes to find

one hundred dollars in tens inside. Each of them looked at one another, then at Rebecca. “Mom. This is too much. How can you do this?” an always concerned Ryan asked his mother.

“Ain’t none of ya business how! It’s mine, and I’ll do what I want wit it den. Got it?” she scolded before turning on her smile again. “Make good decision wit it and have fun. Remember today for as long as you can.

*I think I will remember it forever,* Ryan thought.

“I’m going to do my own shopping. We meet here, at the food court, got it?” Layla looked up at the food court ceiling and decorations, remembering to find the pink and green neon lights illuminating it. “Got it,” Layla said.

Rebecca made everyone promise they would keep Layla close to them no matter who she shops alongside. Layla immediately notified everyone she and Christina would be doing girl shopping. “That sounds fine to me,” Scott agreed, relieved the *little ankle biter* wouldn’t be tagging along with the boys. He was ready to spend his recent fortune, sniffing and rubbing the bills against his face.

“Do you realize how many people probably had their hands on that money?” Christina asked.

“Yeah. Some lady probably changed her kid’s diaper and forgot to wash her hands,” Colin quipped, understanding his new friends’ humor. Scott looked down at the bills and then turned his hands around, “Need to go to the bathroom first.” Ryan elbowed Colin and smiled before sighing, “Now we have to wait longer because he’s a bit obsessive-compulsive.” Yes. That Scott Donovan. The same guy who ate a steak sandwich with cheese and onion for the sole purpose of passing gas near them at some point later in the day was also the one who despised having a speck of dust on his hands. Colin and Ryan sat back down, knowing it may take a while before Scott emerged from the restroom.

“It was wrong of me, I know,” Calvin admitted.

Rebecca and Calvin were fighting in the office downstairs next to the laundry room one evening several months prior. It was after Rebecca was given her diagnosis and timeline. Calvin began consuming alcohol more and more frequently since the news. He had become hateful—spiteful towards others, including his kids. Then the medical bills started coming in, and Calvin had become flustered. There was not enough money to go towards them and live how they had become accustomed.

Devin was up late listening to his records when the noise of his parents fighting came through the vents. His room was located almost directly above the laundry room, making it easy to eavesdrop on any conversation. The yelling had escalated to high pitched screaming from his mother and deeper yells from his father. He crept down the stairs, knowing every croaking spot, attempting not to gain attention. The laundry room door was open, so Devin poked his head around the side and saw his father strike his mother. The sound of his father's against his mom's face echoed through the room, and Devin would never forget it.

"It wasn't a slap, ya know! Your fist was in a ball!" Devin yelled at his father, beginning the tense conversation his dad desired. "I know. You don't have to do a play-by-play on it," Calvin calmly said.

"How do you excuse that?" Devin continued. There was nothing Calvin could say to defend himself, and he knew it. All he could do was take in his son's anger towards him. "I can't. Nothing you can throw at me can or will be justified. After that, I knew I didn't want to be that person anymore. I can't take it back."

Devin was angry because he wanted his father to fight back and throw more verbal jabs at him. "I had a wrong moment. Hell, I've had a lot of wrong moments. Haven't you had bad moments when you talk back to your mother and hurt your brother's feelings when you call him names?" Calvin asked. "Don't even compare those to what you did. What made it even worse was she was already sick!" Devin screamed.

"What do you want from me?" Calvin yelled. "Do you want to hit me? You want to get angry? Come one then. Take your shot!" His father's chest expanded outward, making his body appear huge. Devin looked into his father's eyes—they were wide, black, dilated pupils.

Devin backed away, scared of what Calvin would do if he were to take a swing at him. He realized he was ready to hit his father when an intense situation happened. At the moment, Devin realized he might not be any better than his father. Calvin backed down and leaned against the wall to get his breathing back to normal. He was inhaling and exhaling through his nose deeply, attempting to slow his racing heart.

*You did well. Didn't get mad and hit anyone, practicing self-control,* Calvin thought. He remembered some tricks from a self-help cassette he listened to over the last month for anger management. "I'm sorry it happened, but your mother forgave me. Can you?"

Devin began to put on his shoes and a black jacket to work at Melvin's house. "She forgave you because she had a lack of options. Don't make this out like you would be here if she was healthy." His father was hurt by the mean-spirited comment. Devin didn't know why he said it. He didn't believe it because his mom was a forgiving person. "I don't know. Maybe," he answered before walking away. Calvin watched his son begin to walk down the stairs. Before he made it to the front door landing of the split staircase, Devin walked back up and told his father, "I never thought my dad would be just like every piece of white trash in this town. Drunk all the time and abusive. My best friend has to deal with it, and no one bats an eye. It's not fair. I'm just tired of being the only one who seems to care."

Calvin watched his son walk away, realizing Devin no longer saw him as just his dad anymore—he knew he's a flawed human now. Realizing his first son would never see him as his perfect father broke Calvin in a way only a father would understand. A truth, something Cal hoped to keep a secret from his other two kids a little longer.

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Ryan, Scott, and Colin did what any red-blooded American boys with some money would do—spend too much at Aladdin's Castle Arcade, of course. It was decided by all three they would only use ten dollars of their money in the arcade. After the agreement, Colin excitedly admitted he had never been to an arcade before. Scott, flabbergasted, told him, "I have much to teach you, young one."

Passing the Chess King men's clothing store, the boys came upon a dark storefront, illuminated by demo screens flashing, demanding a coin to be inserted. Bleeps and bloops echoed as people jerked their bodies around, pulling on joysticks and mashing buttons. Colin's eyes scanned the front of the arcade entrance through the dense cigarette smoke coming from inside. All the sounds and videos made him intimidated. Ryan and Scott turned to find their friends had stopped to gaze. With grins plastered on both their faces, the best friends knew Colin was in for a treat.

"What are we going to play?" Colin said in wonderment. Scott put his arm around him and replied, "The question isn't what are we going to play, but what aren't we going to play." The arcade cabinets lined the walls and the middle of the space with a coin machine to change out their money.

Realizing the device only took one and five dollar bills, the boys had to flag down a staff member to break down their tens.

The decision now was what to play? They all walked around the arcade, deciding what to play first—*Pac-Man*, *Burger Time*, *Donkey Kong*, *Outrun*, *Double Dragon*, *Contra*, *The Goonies II*, *Tron*, or maybe even *Centipede*? The arcade cabinets went on and on. Ryan thought it would be acceptable to go to one end of the arcade while Scott and Colin searched for a machine to pump their quarters into. It seemed like Scott was having a time playing arcade sensei to Colin. The first game Colin gravitated towards was *Space Invaders*, which Scott took no issue with. It was then Scott decided to unleash the pent up gas rumbling inside him upon his friends and, unwittingly, the whole arcade. Players stopped to cover their mouths and noses as the musical sounds of the game over screens, players losing lives, and disgust filled the large room.

Christina and Layla made their rounds, bouncing between clothing stores—Wet Seal, Contemporary Classics, Gadzooks, Limited Express, and Merry-Go-Round. After picking up some tops on sale, Christy looked down at Layla, grinning, deciding a trip inside Higbee's for some makeup would be the only place to go next. It wasn't necessarily Layla's thing at such a young age, but she enjoyed Christina liked going in. Knowing her small shadow was becoming bored, Christina bought her a dress on clearance and a Fresh n' Fancy pink makeup kit made for girls Layla's age. "This is probably something her mother should be doing with her," Christina thought.

Then, like any civilized person, the girls walked into Waldenbooks and perused. Christina went towards the Stephen King area, hoping to find something new on the shelves. Hell, there were probably a lot of new books she hadn't seen yet. Unfortunately, any money she received had to be saved for makeup and clothes because her father would never let her have the money to buy some. Books were a luxury Christina could rarely afford, which was a shame. She had two books in her hand, *The Tommyknockers* and *Misery*, so picking only one was difficult. On the one hand, *The Tommyknockers* is a giant book, but *Misery* was well received by critics.

"Why not just get both?" a small voice of reason asked. Christina looked down at Layla, who was staring at the book covers. She had a point; why not get both? It didn't take long for Christina to succumb to the power



of suggestion when it came to books, choosing both novels. Layla picked up one of the books on the same shelf and flipped through it.

"What about this? Would I like *IT*?" Layla asked. Confused about what she was referring to, Christina took the colossal book, looked at the cover, and placed it back on the shelf, knowing its content. "That book is not for you. Not yet anyway," Christina told her. "Maybe when you're older." Christina tugged on Layla's coat and headed toward the register. Layla looked back at the cover, illustrating a paper boat heading towards a storm drain with a reptilian-looking hand emerging.

"But I want to read it," Layla exclaimed. Christina looked down and gave her a piece of her advice. "Read it? You can barely lift it. Rule of thumb: If you can hardly pick up the book, chances are it's probably not made for you. Not yet." *Not to mention the underage gang bang part.*

"But I want to read something scary," Layla pleaded. Christina was hesitant, but if she knew what Layla had seen recently in her own home, the corpses lingering inside, she wouldn't have thought anything of it. So instead, Christina guided Layla to the Goosebumps area and let her pick out one of the smaller books. After what felt like hours of going through the selection, Layla finally decided on *Deep Trouble*. She desired a scary story because she figured it would prepare her for what was coming next—.

Layla knew something was going to happen soon. The dead had been preparing for her, showing the way, but she wasn't sure why. Only her big brother saw them and was just as confused as to why he could and why they were seemingly attached to their family. Layla didn't want to ask for help, though. She was stubborn like her mother. But maybe it was time. *Maybe I need to tell him. No. Show him.*

Scott spent more than initially agreed upon. "How much in quarters did you use?" Ryan asked, knowing it would be an absurd amount because his friend was over the top with his spending over the years. "Thirty," Scott shamefully responded.

"Thirty!"

"On what?" both Ryan and Colin yelled. Scott pointed towards the middle of the arcade. Ryan knew the Bluth animation style from anywhere. The game with the bumbling knight with the blonde woman with the big, well animated breasts. "*Dragon's Lair*? Did you beat it at least?"

"No," Scott answered, looking away, embarrassed. Both Ryan and Colin began to laugh. Scott looked at Colin and yelled, "I don't know what you're

laughing at. You didn't even know what an arcade was before today!"

"I did too! Just never been in one. Only saw one in *The Last Starfighter*," Colin corrected him, not helping his defense much.

Ryan looked down at his Casio watch and saw it was close to meeting his mother at the food court. "Oh, shit! We need to go!" The three quickly walked out of Aladdin's Castle and down the corridor towards The Picnic Place, past Casual Corner and Hickory Farms.

They found the girls waiting for them patiently near the exit. Ryan looked at his mother, noticing she seemed a little run down. "You okay, mom?" he asked, concerned. Rebecca nodded her head with a smile, but Ryan knew she wasn't. It was the usual time she would have to rest for a while now, but she stood straight. With a smug look, she told everyone, "I hope you didn't use too much of your money because I am going to Children's Palace next."

Layla's face lit up with delight and excitement, along with Colin's. It wasn't necessarily their thing for Ryan, Scott, and Christina anymore. However, they recognized it was the most fantastic toy store there ever was. So they all packed in the car uncomfortably again and made their way across the street to Children's Palace with its castle shaped exterior coming over the horizon.

Before the company with the giraffe as a mascot reared his head into the Akron area, there was Children's Palace. Forget Kay-Bee toy stores with their tight aisles; —the 'palace' was where it was at. Children's Palace was a dimly lit store with colored halogen lights animating neon lit animals around the border of the sales floor. The store aisles were so wide four friends could spring down them with Sit 'n Bounce Balls. Every once in a while, Peter Panda, the store mascot, would walk around, giving kids a pat on the head or a hug if the child wanted it.

After walking through the entrance where a person met Layla in a Peter Panda mascot suit with a red balloon, Rebecca pulled Scott and Christina to the side. "I need you to keep Ryan and Layla busy. I'm going shopping for them." They both smiled and nodded, understanding what Rebecca would do—she was Christmas shopping.

Colin and Layla went up and down the aisles, talking about their favorite shows with toys to go along with them. It was easy for Scott and Christina to keep them busy. On the other hand, Ryan was trickier. Most of the items in the store didn't appeal to him as much anymore. If he were

younger, he would want a new Ghostbusters or Transformers toy. Ryan never had any Transformers toys, ever. His dad bought him Go-Bots.

*Go-Bots. The off brand that was not more than meets the eye.*

Scott took Ryan by the arm, pulling him towards the electronics section. “You know you want to look,” he tempted. Ryan began resisting, saying, “No. Nope. There’s no point. I won’t get it any time soon.” Scott laughed maniacally, pulling him harder towards the aisle.

They approached a glass display case protecting the most beautiful, inanimate thing people wanted oh so badly—the Nintendo Entertainment System with Super Mario Bros and Duck Hunt. “You have to make this happen, Ryan. It’s time to ditch the Atari and Coleco Vision. This is your destiny, Ryan—The Legend of Zelda, Mike Tyson’s Punch-Out, Final Fantasy, and...(gasp)...Contra. Up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, B, A, Start...the thirty lives code. Oh yeah, it needs to happen.”

Ryan cut his eyes at Scott and asked, “Why is this on me?”

“Because your family has the scratch. You think my podunk family can afford this? I have to eat knock-off Sugar Smacks. I need to live vicariously through you. By denying yourself, you are making me go without. Is that what you want?” Scott selfishly explained.

“You’re an idiot. Why am I even friends with you?” Ryan joked.

“Two reasons, Ryan, my boy. Because I am so damn exciting, and the other is because of your lack of options. I’m a realist. It’s okay.” Ryan thought about it for a moment and nodded his head in agreement. “You didn’t have to agree about it so fast,” Scott said, disappointed his friend could be so mean. Ryan smiled, showing he was messing with his friend’s ego.

“You know the real tragedy is?” Ryan asked. Scott shrugged, waiting for the follow up. “It’s Black Friday, and these Nintendo’s are not sold out yet.” Scott agreed and added, “Times are tough all over, I guess.” There was no arguing the point. Akron was still overcoming the shutting down of the industrial plants costing thousands of jobs over the past few years.

“What is going on here? What’s all this then?” Rebecca asked as she approached her son and Scott.

“Just fantasizing,” Ryan sighed. Rebecca looked at the glass casing and the games displayed. She knew her sons had been keeping an eye on the Nintendo for some time now. “So, if you had this thing, what three games would you want with it if you had a choice?” she queried.

Ryan and Scott looked at one another, each pondering the question. "Legend of Zelda, Contra, and...Punch-Out. Yeah."

"Good to know. Okay, guys, get everyone out to the car for me. We are going to The Ground Round for dinner." Ryan and Scott, overcome with excitement, ran to find the rest. They loved that restaurant. The food was great, and "They let you throw peanut shells on the floor!" Scott squealed.

Rebecca treated them to a feast they would take for granted at their young age. She enjoyed seeing her kids happy, conversing, and laughing at their silly quips and quirks, soaking it all in for as long as possible as she nibbled on bread. Finally, they all piled into the car, stomachs filled from the early dinner, making the ride home even more uncomfortable than the first few. Everyone thanked *Ryan's mom* as they exited the car and headed into their own homes.

The ride home was strange for Ryan, sensing something was off with his mom. Rebecca had spent way too much money for the day, and she was typically more frugal than his dad. Ryan stepped out of the car and headed to the swing attached to the tree by a rope in the backyard. Lost in his thoughts, he didn't say anything to his mother or Layla.

After settling down from the day, Rebecca walked into the kitchen to make her evening tea. She noticed Ryan sitting on the swing, facing the sunset beaming through the trees. She thought to herself, he is perceptive, knowing she would need to talk with him.

Rebecca walked barefoot through the grass and dying leaves on the ground. She came up behind her son, not wanting to startle him, and waited until he acknowledged her presence. Ryan knew she was there but didn't know what to say.

"I know why you did what you did today," Ryan spoke softly. Rebecca put her hands to her sides and nervously patted her legs. "You're going to go away soon, aren't you?" Rebecca walked over to his side and looked at the orange sun going down over the horizon. "Yeah. I think so. I'm not sure." Ryan nodded his head, already knowing the honest answer.

"I was supposed to die today, son," she confessed, her voice trembling with emotion.

He hated the idea of anyone seeing him get emotional, so he turned his head away, aware that his mother would easily see through him. "Today was a gift, so I guess I wanted it to be for you too," he murmured. "I think

my friends had a good time,” Ryan joked weakly, trying to hold back his tears.

“Did you?” his mother asked, her voice full of concern. Wiping his eyes, Ryan nodded and said, with fractured words and a broken heart, “Yeah, but not if...it means...losing you.”

His mother gently grabbed the back of his head, pulling him into her chest. “I’m on borrowed time now, love. Let’s do what we can with it. Does that sound fair?” They both cried for one another as the sun finally set in the west, casting long shadows over their shared sorrow.



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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# SOMETHING ABOUT YOU

The clan gathered around noon on Saturday to indulge Ryan's theory that his father was a werewolf. Ryan waited for them in the garage, where he helped his dad bring out supplies to rebuild the shed—long sawed-off wood, wood panels, insulation, and a nail gun.

Colin arrived first, followed by Scott, and finally Christina. As they entered the garage, Scott dropped his book bag filled with four walkie-talkies, three binoculars, cans of orange Crush, and snacks for when hunger struck. "What's all this?" Ryan asked, curious.

Scott grinned, ready to educate the group. Ryan recognized this smile—it meant Scott was about to show off. "These, my out-of-touch friend, are TRC-217 CB walkie-talkies and binoculars. Not the plastic ones with orange antennae from our childhood," he proudly explained.

Unimpressed by the display, Ryan glanced at an imaginary camera on the wall, channeling Ferris Bueller. "Let me rephrase—why do you have them?" Christina smirked at Ryan's sarcasm, enjoying his snarky side. "I swiped them from the garage. My dad never uses this stuff, so why not?" Scott replied. Ryan couldn't argue; he wanted to spy, and Scott delivered.

"I have to say... I'm impressed," Ryan admitted, earning a smile from Scott. "Thanks. If only my dad would appreciate it like you do," Scott joked.

Christina struggled with the walkie-talkies, so Colin showed her how to use them. "Press the button to talk, then release it when you're done," he instructed. She nodded, getting the hang of it. "So, what's the plan?" she asked.

The truth was, there was no plan. "Just make sure Dad doesn't get too suspicious," Ryan improvised. They split up around the house and into the woods behind. Colin found a pile of leaves near the shed and crawled inside. Christina hid under a tarp on the deck, while Scott went the extra mile and climbed onto the roof using the patio furniture. The table creaked under his weight, causing concern for Christina. "How much do you weigh?" she whispered, annoyed. "More than you can handle, baby," Scott joked, out of breath. Rolling her eyes, she raised her talkie, ready to report.



Ryan found a more straightforward hiding spot under the deck, behind an old, covered hot tub no one used. He peered through the cracks in the wood above him to see Christina had made herself comfortable. "What's everybody's location?" Ryan spoke into the mic, causing audible feedback catching his father's attention. Calvin stopped what he was doing and glanced towards the patio deck. Scott lay flat on his stomach, hoping his grey hoodie would camouflage him against the roof shingles. Everyone else froze with their ears covered until Calvin resumed hammering and went on about his work. It was safe to move about now. Ryan turned down the volume on his and instructed the others to do the same. They remained silent, not responding to his request. "Hello?"

*"You have to say 'over'—over,"* Scott whispered.

*"Yeah. That's true, over,"* Colin added. Ryan was becoming annoyed by the sticklers he called friends.

*"Even I know that—,"* Christina tacked on before Ryan interrupted, "Okay! I get it!" There was another pause between the four.

*"If you're going to be obnoxious about it, then I don't want to play anymore,"* Scott snobbishly said. He was trying to get Ryan's goat and was successful.

*Good grief.*

Colin poked his binoculars out of the leaves to watch Calvin work. *"Why am I the only one away from you all?"* he asked. Ryan looked around, realizing he, Scott, and Christina were all on the same side, just different height levels. *"He's right. We need to get on other sides,"* Ryan realized, finally preparing a plan.

*"How do you plan on that, genius? There are only so many sides before we venture into Cragg's yard. Even then, it's wide open—over,"* Scott pointed out. Ryan looked around the yard and into the woods and found other hiding areas behind the shed. *"I'm going to the back of the shed by the woods. I'll go left and circle to the back. Christina. Colin. I need you two to be my eyes, over."*

*"You can't! The noise of the crackling leaves and branches will alert him. It's too risky. It's suicide, I tell ya! Over."* Scott desperately told Ryan.

*"My God, man! What would you have me do? It's the only way! Over."* Ryan quietly yelled into the mic.

*"You son of a bitch! You got big balls, Ryan."* Scott sighed.

*"That's what your mom said last night, over,"* Ryan chuckled.

*“Overdramatic much? Over,”* Christina chimed in with her two cents, wondering if her taste in guys was questionable. However, there was a playfulness to Ryan she had never seen or heard of before, which was endearing even though it came off as dorky. *“I’m going in, over,”* Ryan declared before emerging from under the deck to dash towards the woods.

*“I salute you, soldier,”* Colin chimed in, *“...over.”*

Calvin heard a rustling come from the woods. He poked his head out from the side of the shed, thinking it was a squirrel.

*“Get down!”* Christina told him. Ryan fell flat onto the ground, holding still for someone to give him the go ahead. Calvin walked out in front of the building, looking off into the woods, not detecting one of the three sets of eyes on him. He lowered his brow, wondering what the noise was before walking back around the shed.

*“He’s going back. Go now and be quiet,”* Colin told Ryan with his binocular lenses still poking out from the leaf pile. *“What’s it like under there?”* Scott asked.

*“Pretty sweet, actually,”* Colin replied.

Ryan managed to make his way towards the back of the shed facing the woods, slowly crawling on his stomach most of the way. There he was, on the precipice of reaching his destination. Scott Donovan walked in front of him and lay next to him. *“What’s up, man?”*

*“How did you get over here so fast?”* Ryan furiously asked, keeping his voice low.

*“I just cut across the yard. Your dad didn’t see me. I was good and quiet,”* Scott nonchalantly answered while chewing on a red Twizzler. Ryan sat up with his back facing the nearby shed, perturbed he went the extra mile when he didn’t need to. *“Did you bring me one at least?”* Ryan pointed to the candy in Scott’s mouth. He pulled out a Twizzler from his hoodie pocket and handed it to Ryan. Picking off the lint, Ryan stopped and quickly ate it.

*“You guys, he just went inside the shed with some wood. I think you’re good to go,”* Colin communicated. Ryan and Scott crawled to the back of the shed, where they found a hole to look inside. *“Radio silence,”* Scott whispered before turning his and Ryan’s walkie off. Christina and Colin didn’t understand what he meant and kept theirs on.

Ryan’s left eye hovered over the hole, careful not to get too close to the splintered wood, fearing he would get poked, resulting in a doctor’s trip to

receive a tetanus shot. He watched his father begin placing the pink insulation against the newly installed wall with safety goggles on. Calvin shifted his goggles and protective mask around his face, attempting to put them in a more comfortable position. “Why wear a mask?” Ryan whispered to Scott. Surprised Ryan didn’t know something so basic, he answered, “Protects against the fiberglass.” Scott didn’t understand why Ryan didn’t know basic things like tools. Everyday things men should traditionally know just weren’t interesting to him. It was a trade-off—Scott could teach him how to fix things, and Ryan could be the sensible one.

Calvin looked at two sets of panels to nail over the insulation. There was something wrong with the size of one of them, but he couldn’t make out what or why. Calvin pulled the wood outside to compare it with the others. After looking at the other pieces, he realized he had cut one of the panels too short, making it impossible to nail into a stud.

“God fuckin’ dammit, piece of fucking crap! God!” he bellowed, scaring Christina and Colin. Ryan and Scott lay flat against the back of the shed, terrified to reveal themselves. “What do we do?” Scott mouthed. Ryan had a blank stare, not knowing what to do next.

They looked through the hole and saw Calvin in front of the shed, kicking and punching new drywall, cursing under his breath with more rage than his son had ever seen. Not only did his dad not look like himself from a few weeks ago, but when he became angrier in the moment, Ryan was more frightened by him than ever before. Before, he would just yell. Now, he was hitting and throwing objects. Calvin charged into the shed and began throwing glass jars full of nails, screws, and washers—it wasn’t enough.

Christina watched Ryan’s father from above stomp into the house with hatred in his eyes, slamming doors along the way. She pressed the button on her device and began to yell for Ryan and Scott to get away. “*Hello? Hello!*”—there was no answer on Ryan or Scott’s end. Christina began to panic, asking Colin if he saw them anywhere. “*No. I hid when his dad got mad. Sorry!*”

The garage door slammed shut again, jolting Christina's nerves. Her heart raced, but what she witnessed next froze her in terror. Calvin strode back to the shed, a pistol gripped tightly in his right hand. *No! That's where they are! Don't shoot!* The words screamed in her mind, but fear choked her voice, leaving her breathless.

As Calvin reached the shed's entrance, he let out a primal scream, unleashing a flurry of gunfire into the wooden structure. Bullets tore through the air, shredding the already splintered wood. Six shots echoed, then another six after he reloaded. Christina prayed silently, hoping her friends had escaped from the violent onslaught. Colin covered his ears, desperate to block out the chaos, while Christina stifled her gasps, dreading what she might witness.

In the deafening silence following, Christina cautiously opened her eyes. Smoke and dust hung in the air, obscuring her view. Then, movement in the bushes caught her eye. A sickening realization dawned on her—her friends might be lying lifeless behind the shed, victims of Calvin's fury. Helpless, she waited for Calvin to leave before she could act.

Calvin glanced down at his weapon, taking a deep breath as he struggled with his emotions. Unaware of his son's presence just beyond the wreckage, he retreated into the garage, then the house. In solitude, he collapsed onto the couch, tears cascading down his cheeks, the weight of a desolate future settling heavily upon him.

Emerging from under cover, Christina dashed down the patio stairs, her senses on high alert, unsure if it was safe. As she reached the yard, a mound of leaves stirred, revealing Colin, who had wriggled out from beneath the pile, concern etched on his young face. She instinctively raised her hand, silently urging him to halt. He shouldn't witness the potential horror lurking behind the shed. *No child should see a dead body. Neither should I.*

Approaching the side of the building cautiously, Christina poked her head around the corner, her heart pounding with dread. She closed her eyes briefly before taking another step, silently praying it wasn't true. *Please, let it be something else.* When she opened her eyes, relief flooded her as she spotted a large branch resting atop a cluster of bushes. "That tree branch didn't stand a chance," a voice remarked from behind her.

Turning around, Christina saw Ryan beside her, peering down at the bushes with the same mixture of concern and relief. "Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed, pulling Ryan into a tight hug. After a moment, she released him and launched into a tirade. "I thought you were still there! I thought you were going to be riddled with bullets!" Christina sighed and hugged Ryan once more, the fear still palpable in her embrace. "I didn't mean to make you worry," Ryan muttered, at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, Scott, with another Twizzler still in his mouth, waved his arms in the air. "I'm fine, by the way!" he announced. Colin approached Scott from behind, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I was worried about you too," he admitted earnestly. Scott nodded appreciatively and replied, "Thanks, man."

Then, true to form, Colin bombarded them with questions. "Were you scared? Where did you go? How did you escape? What kind of gun do you think that is? Was it too loud? I thought it was too loud. Can I have a Twizzler? I don't like the black ones. Do you like the black ones?"

Scott, grumbling, retreated, "Sweet Jesus, I wish I had gotten shot."

Agreeing the day's events were too overwhelming to process in the moment, Ryan's friends departed to seek solace at home for the remainder of their Saturday. There was an undeniable truth: Ryan's father was not himself, at least not in any recognizable way. Something needed to be addressed, but Ryan was at a loss for where to begin. The only certainty was his father's volatile outburst earlier must not happen again.

Entering from the garage, Ryan found his brother engrossed in playing Enduro on their Atari 2600, a household staple their dad had acquired from work years ago. Moving through the house, Ryan entered the laundry room and his father's office, where Calvin kept his firearms. Opening the closet door, Ryan retrieved the shoebox housing his father's pistol—the Astra Terminator. Its warmth lingered on the muzzle, unsettling him. Ensuring it was unloaded, Ryan tucked the gun into the waistband of his jeans, concealing it beneath his red hoodie. He pocketed a handful of bullets, a meager defense against whatever threat lurked, be it a wolf or something more sinister. Though other guns were locked away, one was better than none.

A draft swept through the office, sending shivers down Ryan's spine. He felt watched, a sensation he had grown all too familiar with. Scanning the room, he spotted a shadowy mass hovering in the laundry room, its gaze fixed on him from outside the house. Another draft stirred the air, this time from the office window with its faulty lock. Calvin's negligence left it vulnerable, a fact Ryan now regretted.

Turning to close the window, Ryan froze as the head of a figure with blue tinged skin appeared outside, its vacant, milky eyes locking onto his. Panic surged as dark, viscous blood spilled from its gaping mouth. The

figure, once a teenager, contorted grotesquely as it dragged itself away, leaving streaks of blood in its wake—a grim reminder of its past humanity.

In the ensuing silence, Ryan struggled to calm himself, only to be jolted by a tapping at the window. The undead teenager returned, his mournful moans pleading for acknowledgment. Ryan recoiled, unwilling to engage. Shaking his head, he forced the ghastly vision from his mind, retreating from the office, the haunting moans lingering in his ears until he reached the living room, where his brother played *Pitfall*.

“Devin?” Ryan ventured, seeking his brother's attention amidst the game's frenetic action. “Yeah?” Devin responded, absorbed in his gameplay.

“I think there’s something wrong with dad.”



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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# WEST END GIRLS

*"Hello?"* Eric answered the phone, forgetting few still cared.

"Hey, man! It's Devin. Where have you been? It's like I have to make plans to see you."

*"Sorry. Got a lot on my plate with school and stuff."*

Devin anticipated the awkwardness of the conversation. Asking for permission to go out with Valerie after their breakup felt inherently wrong. "Hey, um, so there's this party tonight hosted by some rich kid from Wadsworth. Valerie invited me, but I wanted to check with you first because, you know, you guys used to date."

A faint chuckle emanated from the other end of the line, which Devin interpreted as a dismissive response. Eric's reluctance to endorse the idea wasn't unexpected. Devin joined in the laughter, easing the tension. "Yeah, I figured as much, man. Just thought I'd run it by you anyway. Don't want anything to mess with our friendship and all."

*"Dude, it's fine. I'm an adult, and I think I did the right thing. Have fun, but not too much fun. Chick can be a real man-eater. I'm just putting it out there,"* Eric replied shockingly. Flustered, Devin fumbled around his room, needing to find something to wear to the party.

"If it's all cool then, I'll go with her?" Devin reiterated.

*"Have fun. Maybe I'll see you there."*

They hung up after exchanging a casual "later." Devin struggled to catch his breath; he had never felt this excited before. After immersing himself in the idea of being alone with her, Devin eagerly picked up the phone again to confirm to Valerie it was on.

After ending the call with Devin, Eric turned towards the mirror in his now immaculate room, his reflection staring back at him. He observed the transformation in his appearance and state of mind. Those affected by the wolf's bite, who struggled to accept the gift or curse, saw their human bodies diminish, weakened by their internal conflict. Only by embracing the wolf within could one unlock their true potential, becoming resilient, balanced, and formidable.

*You have done well.*

*You have created order in your life.*

*You are rejecting the chaos and filth, pushing it away.*

*You, we, will hunt in three days for three nights when the moon is whole.*

Eric nodded in acknowledgment of the inner voice guiding him, fully grasping the task lying ahead and the necessary steps he must take. Yet, he understood that attaining peace, for both him and others, would demand patience. The hardships he had endured should not be inflicted upon anyone else—a reality he had witnessed too frequently. Despite his noble intentions and well devised plan, Eric remained acutely aware of the unpredictable nature of the wolf in its entirety.

Devin rummaged through his clothes, tossing aside anything not fitting the party vibe, creating a mess in his otherwise tidy room. After much deliberation, he settled on a pair of dark blue jeans, a red button-up shirt left untucked, and a sleek black jacket paired with his favorite Doc Martens. Now came the crucial part.

Knocking lightly on his parents' bedroom door, Devin entered to find his mother, Rebecca, flipping through a Cosmopolitan magazine. "You look nice. Where are you off to?" she inquired casually, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"Can I use the car? There's a party. Valerie invited me to go with her," Devin replied, his nerves evident as he awaited her response.

Rebecca paused, considering for a moment before nodding. "Sure, why not," she consented, causing Devin to pump his fist in triumph prematurely.

"But," she added, flipping a page in her magazine, "you'll have to take your brother and his friends along."

Devin's elation deflated instantly, the realization hitting him with the sound of The Price is Right soundtrack when a contestant loses. "Mom, are you serious?" he protested, hoping it was just a joke.

"Absolutely. They could use something to do, and they'll be in high school soon. It'll be good for them to socialize," Rebecca explained with a shrug, her logic unwavering. He slouched, feeling defeated, and stormed out of the room with a muttered "Fine!"

As her son left with an attitude, Rebecca couldn't help but sip her tea with a satisfied smile.

To distract himself from his frustration, Devin headed downstairs and powered up the Atari, intending to pass the time before he had to leave to pick up Valerie and *whoever else*. As he immersed himself in the game, he

heard his dad enter the house, clearly agitated about something, likely related to the shed, before storming out again, slamming the door behind him. The sudden sound of gunshots outside startled Devin momentarily, but he dismissed it, attributing it to hunters or others firing rounds in the woods, a common occurrence.

Soon after, he heard lighter footsteps entering the house and making their way to the laundry room. Assuming it was his father returning, Devin paid little attention until the person spoke, and he recognized it was Ryan. Without acknowledging him, Devin continued to focus on his game.

“Devin?” Ryan's voice interrupted his concentration.

“Yeah?” Devin responded, still engrossed in the game, his hands maneuvering the joystick.

“I think there's something wrong with Dad,” Ryan stated, drawing Devin's attention from the screen.

Setting aside the controller, Devin powered off the Atari, recognizing the seriousness in his brother's tone. While their interactions were often minimal, this time felt different, like a conversation between equals. Devin turned to face Ryan as he approached and took a seat on the couch.

“What's going on?” Devin asked, avoiding calling him a name. *Trout sniffer would have been a good one. Wait. Did I use that recently?* Devin started mentally listing the names he could jokingly call his brother later, but then he remembered they were supposed to have a serious discussion.

It was tricky for Ryan to say what he was about to say. He would have to start at the beginning of Halloween night and get through it without becoming overly emotional—he didn't want to seem weak in front of his brother. So Ryan laid out the events after Eric was pulled away by the giant wolf and what he came across when he reached the cornfield on Halloween night. The werewolf, the shooting, the conversion back into a human, the ghosts, and finally, his theory about who it may have spread to—namely Eric, Valerie, and their dad.

“So let me make sure I am getting this right. Taking the werewolf stuff out of the equation, are you saying our parents, Rick Donovan and Melvin Craggs, shot someone and hid the body somewhere on Halloween?”

“Well, Melvin shot it with a shotgun, so yeah.”

“You understand what you're saying? Our parents are accessories to murder?”

“Whaddya have them do? If that guy was a werewolf and none of them knew that until after he died, how would they explain it? Who would believe them?” Ryan questioned, hoping Devin would agree. “I think they did the smart thing. They had us to think of,” Ryan justified.

Devin crossed his arms and began to think about his brother's truth dropping onto his lap. He wasn't going to argue what Ryan saw or what he thought he saw, but he didn't have to acknowledge it either.

“Dad has had anger issues before, Ryan. You just never saw it,” Devin admitted. Ryan, not believing his brother, “If that's true, it can't be like this. He was punching and kicking holes in drywall and thin wood panels.”

“It's not hard to do,” Devin informed.

“You didn't see it. Not like this,” Ryan countered, standing from his seat, trying to get his point across.

“I saw dad hit mom! Okay?” Devin yelled, interrupting Ryan's train of thought. Ryan sat back on the couch, shaking his head, not wanting to believe what Devin said. “It was around the time they found out about her cancer. I think they were arguing about money and bills. She said something, probably being defiant like mom does, and he punched her. She fell to the floor, holding her face. That's why he moved out.”

“Was he drunk?” Ryan asked. Devin nodded his head, “Yeah. Definitely.” Ryan threw his arms in the air and exclaimed, “Well, that's why! Not that he should have done it, of course, but he wasn't drunk today. Dad hasn't been drinking at all since he's been back—he's getting worse without the alcohol. His rage is coming to a head, and I'm afraid of what happens when it explodes.”

Devin wasn't going to debate with his little brother about the fantasy he believed Ryan concocted in his mind. Instead, he shifted the focus to getting to the party. “Let's talk about it later. You need to get ready.” Confused, Ryan asked, “Ready for what?”

“A party.”

Playing with the buttons on his shirt, Devin side-eyed Ryan, annoyed with him. Before Ryan could place one foot on a step, Devin mumbled, “You're kind of an asshole. You know that?” Ryan stopped, looked over his shoulder, and questioned, “What did you just say?”

“You heard just fine. I tell you our dad hit our dying mother, and you use it to justify your ridiculous werewolf theory. You made it about you.”

An exhausted Ryan, sick of his brother's angst, began to yell. "That's rich. You telling me not to be self-absorbed when all you've done is mope in your room, trying to forget the rest of us exist? You think it's going to be easier for you when mom's gone?"

"Shut your face!"

"Pushing us out of your sight. Out of sight, out of mind, right? Tryin' to get those pesky reminders of her away, are ya?"

"That's not what it is, ok?"

"Then what?"

"I can't stand watching her turn to nothing! I'd rather her have something else! Something she can live with! She's my mom!"

"And I'm your brother! We're your goddamn family too! It's not about you either! Hypocrite! Asshole!" Ryan ended.

After a minute of silence, Ryan began ascending the stairs. Devin looked away, wanting to come back with something justifying his anger with his little brother.

Ryan turned around and told him, "You can believe me or don't. I'm so tired. I can't sleep because of this crap goin' on. Too much weird shit is going on you can't see. I mean, the mother of the two killed by an animal almost a month ago stood in front of Flanagan and then threw herself into traffic. Sorry, but that's weird in this little town. I used to think nothin' exciting ever happened here, and now I wish it didn't. Help me or not. Don't care anymore. Can't make you care. Maybe I'll just wipe my hands of you like you have with us." Ryan continued up the stairs. It was time to get dressed for a party he didn't even want to go to as Devin ruminated on his thoughts.

Devin moped as he and Ryan climbed into their mother's Dodge "Turbo" Daytona to pick up Christina, Valerie, and Scott. It had been unanimously decided over the phone Colin shouldn't attend this kind of party. According to Scott, his sixth grade mind wouldn't be able to handle it. Devin and Valerie were well aware of what this shindig would entail, and they knew the other three were in for a surprise.

Emerging from the house wearing a blue V-neck sweater, a Debbie Gibson hat accompanied by a white skirt, and Keds, Christy looked as beautiful as ever, Ryan thought. Devin elbowed his brother, raising his

eyebrows and nodding subtly, silently acknowledging Ryan's successful interaction. "Why don't you two get in the back? Valerie is going to sit upfront." Ryan hopped out of the car, nearly colliding with Christina. Their faces were closer to each other than they had ever been before. They nervously smiled and said, "excuse me" and "sorry." Devin turned in his seat towards the two, laughing, telling them, "Congrats. That was the most awkward thing I have ever seen."

They drove down the street and arrived at the Donovan residence. Devin blared the horn to alert Valerie and Scott, which Ryan thought was *kinda rude*. He was always under the impression you came to the door, but he didn't consider maybe Devin didn't want to run into Rick. Scott came out first with a simple outfit: a black sweater and faded jeans, sporting slicked back hair, a new look for him. Valerie followed, wearing a low cut, long, fuzzy pink sweater stopping below her rear, black leggings, and a thick white belt around her waist. Devin couldn't help but notice Valerie's accentuated breasts. They all exchanged hellos and heys when they sat down in the car, ready to go to a high school party in the neighboring town.

The route to Wadsworth was straightforward. The main road outside the Holiday Heights subdivision was Wadsworth Road; just take a left and go straight. It couldn't be simpler. Devin didn't want his brother or friends to come along, but Valerie was excited for them. She turned around in her seat, grinning from ear to ear, finding it cute that her little brother and his friends were going to their first real party.

"Are you guys excited?" Valerie asked, hoping for a positive response. They all shrugged their shoulders, uncertain about themselves, especially Ryan and Christy, who felt awkward in their own bodies.

"I'm surprised! I remember how excited I was for the first big party I went to," Valerie reminisced.

"And I'm surprised you can even talk with your tits all the way up to your throat," Scott quipped, being the annoying little brother he was. He was good at it.

Annoyed by Scott's remark, Christina repeatedly slapped Scott on the arm. "You are such an asshole!" Valerie, amused by Christina's reaction, decided to join in beating her little brother. Ryan cowered in the corner, attempting to stay out of the female warpath.

"Was it something I said?" Scott laughed before Christina gave him one more good punch in the arm, making him yelp in pain one last time.

They arrived at a large two story house, nestled away from other neighbors by at least half a mile, with a large pond in the back. Teenagers' cars lined the street, making it challenging for Devin to find a spot close to the house. Eventually, they found a place on the side of the road and walked up to the residence.

The front door stood wide open, welcoming anyone to come inside. Drunk high schoolers wandered in and out, seeking fresh air or enjoying a smoke. They made their way into what was probably once an immaculate home, now showing signs of wear and tear from rowdy high schoolers. Passing through the living room area, they encountered an extremely inebriated girl with a purple t-shirt and a sloppy sidetail, belting out the titular song about taking a relationship slow, "*We Don't Have to Take Our Clothes Off*," by Jermaine Stewart.

"...too have a good time...no, no!" she yelled into the mic, hoping for a sing-along.

Scott glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention to the girl, and if they were, why? "Sounds like someone is choking a constipated yak," he joked, hoping to elicit some laughter from those nearby. His quip succeeded, drawing laughs from Ryan, Christina, and a couple of guys leaning against a nearby wall leading to the kitchen.

As the night unfolded, Devin and Valerie found themselves chatting on the back porch, enjoying the view of the pond. Meanwhile, Ryan, Christina, and Scott mingled in the family room, where some older kids were engrossed in a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven. Intrigued, all three decided to participate by dropping their names into the bowl.

A slender Black student, sporting large shades and denim overalls with one side of the front flap left unbuckled, took charge as the master of ceremonies, effortlessly commanding the microphone.

Christina ventured over to the girls' side, where they exchanged the names they had drawn. According to the party's rule, if the participants were more than a grade apart, they were exempt from entering the closet together. Unfortunately, Stephanie Melker, Ryan's supposed stalker with her pearls, held Ryan's name. And, as luck would have it, Stephanie was determined to cheat.

Ignoring Christina's attempts to intervene, Stephanie stubbornly clung to Ryan's name. Frustrated, Christina took matters into her own hands, boldly pulling Stephanie from the crowd. "Alright, Steph! What's it going to

take for you to give up his name?" she demanded, amused by Christina's audacity. In response, Stephanie chuckled, "You're out of your mind if you think I'm giving up Ryan and that pretty mouth of his."

Meanwhile, Scott, having grown impatient with waiting, wandered off to another part of the house, where some guys were attempting keg stands. Despite being an eighth grader, Scott's height and demeanor earned him acceptance into their group. One hour into the party, Scott was already buzzing, much to Ryan's chagrin, who shook his head, knowing he would have his hands full with Scott during high school.

The MC's voice boomed over the microphone, calling out Scott's name. Initially oblivious, Scott was jolted into attention by the high schoolers' cheers. Realizing he had forgotten about his participation, Scott found himself being pushed towards the closet. "There he is, everyone!" the MC exclaimed, urging Scott to select a name from the bowl as the girls eagerly awaited their turn. Caught off guard by the sudden attention, Scott waved awkwardly, unsure how to handle the spotlight.

"And... Ramona...Dankworth?" the MC shouted, reading the name from the paper.

He looked around for the lucky lady who was goin' to get a taste of some man candy to find a first year student making her way through the crowd. Ramona was taller than he was, with black hair, braided pigtails, and headgear making her way through the crowd. Scott's smile turned into a frown of concern. Scott thought, *this girl is massive and could cut my face open with her braces with one sudden tilt of her head.*

"You know what? I'm not feelin' so hot," Scott muttered, crafting an excuse to avoid his first kiss with Ramona Dankworth. Glancing over at Ryan, he silently pleaded for assistance in escaping the Seven Minutes in Hell closet with her. Ryan, chuckling, approached him, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Look. Take the metal off her face and lose the pigtails; you don't have it too bad. She's tall, and trust me, in a few years, Ramona will be a total babe. Get in now while you can!" Ryan advised with a grin.

"I don't know, man. Ramona's got a lot goin' on with that grill. And she's got a wide face. It's goin' to be like makin' out with a Jack o Lantern," Scott protested.

"Maybe. But if you're good...word travels fast in these towns," Ryan wisely countered, raising his eyebrows. Although Ryan wasn't entirely



convinced by his own words, Scott seemed to buy into them, and that's what mattered most. With a shrug, they both entered the narrow closet, and as the MC closed the doors, the crowd erupted into cheers. Ryan flashed Scott a huge smile, accompanied by a sarcastic thumbs up.

"What do you want?" Christina confronted Stephanie; her tone laced with frustration.

"Please. Like you have anything I could possibly want," Stephanie retorted, her words dripping with contempt. Then, with a malicious grin, she leaned in closer to Christina and whispered, "What would he want with some poor girl from a trash home whose parents want nothing to do with her? Let him be with someone with a future. Not some would-be orphan if her parents made the right decision."

"Seven minutes is up! Get those two out!" the MC announced, stirring up the crowd. Stephanie waved mockingly as she taunted, "Uh-oh. Looks like I'm next." She sauntered to the front of the room, relishing the attention. Pretending to rummage in the bowl, she theatrically pulled out a slip of paper. Opening it, she revealed Ryan's name. "Ryan Hatcher and Steph Melker!" the MC declared, prompting cheers from the crowd.

"Looks like someone's playing my song. I'll make sure we make beautiful music," Stephanie remarked with a wink as she headed towards the closet opening. Christina seethed with anger, her fists clenching around her pearl necklace, a primal urge to lash out rising within her. As she spotted Ryan approaching, Christina's heart sank, convinced she wouldn't be what Ryan wanted. Tears welled up as she pushed her way through the crowd, amidst the cacophony of teenage banter about school mascots.

Scott caught sight of Christina storming off into the backyard and urgently called out to Ryan, "Dude!" Ryan glanced over, noticing Christina's curly blonde hair bobbing as she retreated, clearly upset at the prospect of him entering the closet with another girl. Stephanie grew uneasy, sensing Ryan's hesitation. She knew he was contemplating ditching her to chase after Christina.

"Don't you leave me like this and embarrass me! You'll ruin the best shot you ever will have with me," Stephanie warned, clutching his arm tightly. Ryan recoiled, his upper lip curling in disgust at Stephanie's arrogance. "The best chance I have ever had just ran outside. Excuse me," Ryan spat out bitterly, wrenching his arm free as he made a beeline for the back door, eager to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the party.



# CHAPTER NINETEEN

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# NEW SENSATION

Devin and Valerie reclined on the grass near the dock, where Akron's privileged residents parked their small boats and kayaks. "You sure you don't want to go back in?" Devin inquired softly. Valerie edged closer to him, her eyes reflecting the moonlight as she replied, "Honestly, not really. I just wanted an excuse to hang out with you." A bashful smile crept onto Devin's face as he looked away, the warmth of her words washing over him like a gentle breeze. "You never need an excuse to hang out with me. Just ask."

The soft strains of *All through the Night* by Cyndi Lauper drifted through the open windows of the party behind them, adding to the ambiance. Valerie nervously bit her bottom lip before gathering the courage to ask Devin a question she already knew the answer to. "You like me, don't you?" His smile spoke volumes, but Valerie wanted to hear it from him. "Why didn't you say anything?" Devin's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as he averted his gaze. Sensing his vulnerability, Valerie tenderly cupped his face in her hands and guided his eyes to meet hers before leaning in for a gentle kiss.

It was everything Devin had imagined and more.

"Have you ever, ya know, made it with a girl?" Valerie whispered seductively into his ear. Devin chuckled nervously, feeling the weight of her question. "What? Like right now?" he joked, attempting to lighten the mood. Valerie laughed softly as warm breath teased his skin. "No, you weirdo! Not in the backyard," she teased, glancing around to ensure their privacy. "Have you? Ya know?" she asked again, her curiosity piqued. It was the age old dilemma of teenage boys—admitting inexperience or risking being labeled a prude. "No," Devin confessed.

Unfazed by his response, Valerie took his hand in hers, her touch reassuring. "How come?" she inquired gently, genuine curiosity in her eyes. Devin narrowed his eyes, pondering her question. "Well, believe it or not, I'm not exactly beating off girls with a stick," he quipped, hoping to ease the tension. Valerie's expression softened into a sympathetic smile. "Surprises me! It really does."

“Not many people look my way,” Devin explained, his tone tinged with self-deprecation. Valerie’s features softened further, her heart going out to him. “Girls can be so dumb sometimes,” she remarked ruefully. “We get used to going for the ones who are bad for us, thinking that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

Devin considered probing into Valerie’s personal life, sensing a shared understanding. “You think your folks being like that influenced your idea of relationships?” he ventured. Valerie mulled over his question, wondering if it’s why she found Eric appealing. “I don’t know. Maybe. I guess I thought Eric would save me because of his dad and mine...” Her voice trailed off, uncertainty coloring her words. “Would you save me if I needed it?” she asked quietly, turning to face him.

“Anytime,” Devin vowed earnestly, his gaze unwavering. “But I don’t think you need anyone to save you from anything.” Valerie rested her head on Devin’s shoulder, a sense of peace settling over them. For the first time in a long while, they basked in the tranquility of each other’s company, finding solace in the silence enveloping them. And amidst the stillness, Devin realized someone was finally at ease with him.

“So you’ve never been with a girl?” Val asked again, her tone incredulous. “No. Why does it matter so much?” Devin wondered, feeling the weight of her scrutiny. Valerie shrugged, a mischievous glint in her eye. “It’s just kinda rare for a guy your age to still be... untouched,” she declared, her voice laced with amusement. Struck by inspiration, she gasped dramatically. “You’re like a unicorn! A sexy high school unicorn!” Devin felt his cheeks flush as he glanced around, aware of the curious stares directed their way. “Okay! I think the entire western side of Akron knows now,” he muttered, feeling a blush creeping up his neck as Valerie giggled and pulled him back towards her.

“Why does it matter?” she questioned, her curiosity piqued.

“I don’t know. I guess I always felt like I wouldn’t measure up,” Devin confessed, his voice tinged with uncertainty. Valerie rolled her eyes playfully. “It’s sex, Dev. Not like trying to poke a straw into a Capri Sun packet on the first try,” she quipped, her words bringing a smile to Devin’s lips. He couldn’t help but marvel at her wit and charm. *Is she even more incredible than I thought?*

“If we’re going to do this, we have to keep it between us,” Valerie insisted, her tone serious. “Why?” Devin asked, puzzled by her request.

"You know how it is. I'm popular, and you're... well, you," Valerie explained awkwardly, her gaze shifting away. "Are you trying to Breakfast Club me? Keep me hidden away until it's convenient for you?" Devin snapped, his frustration boiling over. "Shhh! Lower your voice. People can hear," Valerie hissed, placing a finger to her lips in a hasty attempt to silence him.

"You want to be with me, then do it! I'm not your backup plan. I'm not some second rate option. If you want a fling, go find someone else," Devin declared, his voice rising with indignation as he rose to his feet, ready to storm away. The whispers of the crowd outside grew louder as they discussed Devin's confrontation with Valerie, one of the most popular girls at Norton High School. Valerie felt a pang of embarrassment and uncertainty, realizing for the first time she was out of her depth. She clung to the arbitrary rules of high school social hierarchy like a security blanket, unaware they would soon fade into irrelevance.

Meanwhile, Eric Flanagan watched the scene unfold with keen interest, his gaze following Devin as he stormed away. He knew exactly what had transpired, his heightened senses picking up every word of their exchange. As the murmurs of the crowd filled the air, Eric's mind raced with possibilities, his predatory instincts sharpening as he prepared to make his move.

***You have an intelligent colleague.***

***You should make him one of us.***

***You two could be unstoppable, not allowing trivial things like connections to hold you back.***

"Here I was thinking the same thing," Eric murmured to his alter ego, a faint smile playing on his lips as he stared into the distance. A burly varsity football player from Barberton, clad in a purple and white letterman jacket, downed his makeshift screwdriver, a concoction of Sunny Delight and Everclear. Catching sight of Eric engaged in his internal dialogue, the jock, fueled by alcohol and bravado, took offense and approached with aggression. "What did you say, ginger?" he slurred, clearly spoiling for a fight. Eric turned to face the imposing figure, secretly relishing the opportunity to display his prowess.

He felt the primal energy coursing through him, goading him into the confrontation. Adjusting the cuffs of his long sleeve Billabong shirt, Eric retorted, "I was just wondering how you manage to drown out the taste of Everclear with so little orange juice. Are you trying to set a new record for

alcohol consumption?" Caught off guard by Eric's audacity, the football player, who loomed over Eric and most others at the party, stumbled over his words, attempting to save face. Unfazed, Eric pressed on, seizing the opportunity to strike back. "I see you've been hitting the tequila hard tonight," he taunted, his words laced with sarcasm. "But let's be real here, big guy. Your steroid abuse isn't doing wonders for your manhood. Maybe that's why you're overcompensating with the booze." The player slammed his cup onto the kitchen counter, rallying his friends to join him in confronting Eric. The tension in the room escalated, fueled by Eric's unyielding stance and the player's wounded pride.

*Oh. Yes, please.*

Eric tuned into the quarterback's internal turmoil, sensing the tumultuous clash between stomach acid and tequila. He detected the unsettling churn, the telltale sign of impending upheaval. Yet, the football player's stubborn pride and ironclad self-discipline managed to suppress the rising tide within him. "Ah, there it is," Eric remarked with feigned disgust, simulating retching motions in an attempt to trigger the jock's gag reflex.

The player began to convulse, clutching his abdomen in agony. His disheveled blonde hair fell over his face as he writhed, struggling to contain the roiling storm within. Eric's manipulative ploy was taking effect. He anticipated the inevitable outcome and skillfully exploited it to humiliate the Barberton player through the power of suggestion. "Come on, big guy. Let it out. You'll feel better," Eric goaded, his voice dripping with malice. As the pressure built, he urged the player on, goading him to release the pent-up turmoil within. *Come on-one good push.* Soon, vomit spewed forth, splattering onto the kitchen floor, eliciting audible disgust from the onlookers who then proceeded to mock and ridicule the football player. Amidst the laughter and jeers, Eric remained unfazed, his smirk never faltering as he observed the scene with his piercing yellow eyes. While the crowd reveled in the jock's embarrassment, Eric relished the chaos he had incited. Sensing the player's mounting fury, he welcomed the impending violence, his golden eyes ablaze with anticipation. With a predatory grin, he braced himself for the impending confrontation, ready to embrace the primal instincts others dared to suppress. This exhilarating sensation was uncharted territory for Eric, but he welcomed it with open arms, embracing the darkness within as others recoiled in fear.

Before the altercation with Eric Flanagan began, Ryan dashed out of the back door in search of Christina, who had hastily exited the house, visibly upset, fearing Ryan might kiss someone else in a closet. With no sign of her in the vast backyard, Ryan decided to venture further, navigating through the shrubbery dividing properties into another area. There, he found Christina, her hair shimmering white in the moonlight, legs dangling over the side at the end of a dock. He halted and took a deep breath, preparing himself to talk to her.

"What's wrong?" Ryan inquired, feigning ignorance, though he knew Christina well, having shared countless moments of laughter and tears with her, more than he ever did with Scott. He would never admit it, but Ryan recognized Christina as his closest friend. Yet, amidst this sudden spark of romantic interest, Ryan feared it could all vanish.

"Why aren't you with Stephanie?" Christina asked snidely, her tone laced with bitterness when she mentioned Stephanie's name.

"Because I saw you leave," Ryan replied, closing the distance between them. His footsteps echoed on the boardwalk, prompting Christina to spring to her feet. "You should go back. She's pretty. I get it."

"Is that what you really want to say to me?" Ryan's voice rose with anger, an unfamiliar tone towards Christina. She had never heard him raise his voice like this before.

"No," Christina's voice quivered, "It feels like whenever we're alone and close, I expect you to make a move, and you never do. And the one time I wanted to kiss you; some other girl took my place!"

"I'm sorry, okay? I've never done this before. I thought I was just shy, but not with you. I never have," Ryan explained.

"Then what is it?" Christina sincerely asked.

"I'm scared! Okay? Don't tell Scott, but you're probably my best friend, really. What do I do if it goes away and never comes back? How am I supposed to face you? What if you hate being in a relationship with me and everything goes downhill?" Ryan poured out his fears.

Christina struggled to find the right words. "I don't know what to say to you. I'm not sure how to make you feel better about it. All I know is I would be lost without you. I have this feeling when I'm around you I've never had with anyone else. I wish maybe you felt the same. I wish I could tell you how it will all end. I hope I won't have to."



His arms enveloped her waist as he rested his chin on her shoulder. She felt his breath on her neck, relishing the sensation which was new to her. Christina's hair smelled as wonderful as it did the last time he was near her. He had a natural musk making him irresistible to her sometimes, and it took everything she had to control her hormones from doing things she knew she shouldn't. She closed her eyes, anticipating something she had desired for longer than Ryan would ever know.

"When I kiss you, it's not going to be in a closet with a bunch of people waiting outside. I hope that's not what you wished for because it's not what I want. It will be when it's just us, alone. Somewhere we will remember no matter what or when," Christina declared, looking onto the pond as the lights from the houses across the way illuminated small waves. The water was tame, and the breeze light—the perfect setting.

"I think when is right now," she whispered. Ryan turned her around, looked into her eyes, and leaned in to kiss his new girlfriend, Christina White. They practiced making out for what seemed to be hours but was only several minutes. They pulled away to look at one another, giggling, knowing how weird but fantastic it was. Christina began to walk away with a smile on her face.

"What? What is that smile?" Ryan asked, concerned if she hated the way he kissed her. Christina turned around, revealing a calm, relaxed, almost stuck-up look. She looked him up and down and answered, "Not bad, Mr. Hatcher. Not bad at all. There may be hope for you yet." Ryan, relieved, smiled and ran up behind her to tickle her. Christina screamed and ran away, trying to avoid his fingers—he knew how ticklish she was.

Ryan and Christina strolled back to the party, relishing each other's presence. As they approached the tall bushes delineating the property, piercing screams and shouts erupted from the party house. Unlike typical avoidance, everyone in the backyard rushed toward the windows to glimpse the unfolding chaos. Squeezing through the shrubbery gap, they beheld a scene of turmoil emanating from the kitchen area. Ryan spotted Valerie ascending a small hill but couldn't locate his brother nearby, sparking concern Devin might be involved.

Navigating through the throng, they entered the house. A boy from another school sat on the floor, propped against the kitchen island, clutching his wrist and grimacing in agony. The cacophony of voices gradually hushed as Ryan homed in on the distressed high school athlete, lamenting,

"I can't play anymore. It's all over... No one will recruit me... I've lost my scholarship. It's finished!" Ryan maneuvered through the crowd, eager to discern what had transpired.

*It was that auburn haired kid. Did you see how fast he was? Where'd he go?*

The boy cradled his right wrist, his gaze fixed on his hand, fingers hanging limp from the knuckles once attaching them. Each shake of his fist caused the bones in his digits to sway loosely, held in place only by skin and flesh. Amid his wails of agony, he tested his thumb, ensuring it still retained some functionality. Several upperclassmen who had rallied behind the Barberton player now sprawled on the kitchen floor, some nursing bloody noses while others lay unconscious, creating crimson pools from the cracks in their heads. While no fatalities occurred during this brutal altercation, the level of violence exacted made a resounding statement. Ryan and his cohorts recognized the aggressor from eyewitness accounts; there remained no doubt. Eric Flanagan had undergone a profound change, both mentally and physically, providing Ryan with ample evidence to support his suspicions—at least in his own mind.

Devin approached Ryan from behind, whispering urgently, "We need to leave." Ryan nodded in agreement, acknowledging his brother's assessment. As the boy in the letterman jacket cradled his crushed hand, crying out in despair over his shattered dreams, Ryan departed to locate Scott and Valerie. Amidst all the trials and tribulations Ryan would face in his life, the haunting sound of hopelessness emanating from the boy was one he knew he would never forget. Subsequently, they learned the unfortunate, inebriated individual in the letterman jacket was the quarterback for Barberton High School.

All five teenagers who had anticipated a night of fun and cherished memories now sat in silence as they drove home. Scott, Devin, and Christina couldn't shake off Ryan's story about the events of Halloween night. They all sensed something was off with Eric Flanagan, but none were willing to confront it just yet. Ryan glanced over at them, catching their gaze before they quickly averted their eyes. Tonight wasn't the time for the conversation.

Devin pulled into Scott and Valerie's house to drop them off. Valerie glanced at Devin, silently hoping for reassurance, but instead, she asked, "Call you tomorrow?" Devin nodded in response. As Scott stepped out and

exchanged knowing smiles with Ryan and Christina, Ryan grinned subtly. Scott, recognizing the unspoken understanding, smirked and headed home. Next was Christina's home, and although the new couple was coy, their affection was evident. In the rearview mirror, Devin noticed Ryan reaching for Christina's hand, using only his pinky to gently rub it. Despite the unfortunate turn of events later in the night, there was no denying the positive impact it had on them.

Ryan walked Christina to her door, admiring how her blonde hair bounced with each step. "Sorry the night didn't end on a high note. It was going so well," Ryan remarked apologetically. Christina turned around, disagreeing, "It's one to remember, but not because of what happened to that guy. I'll remember the pond more, sweetie." Without kissing Ryan goodbye, she shot him a playful, almost seductive glance as she closed the door behind her. Ryan couldn't help but smile, excited about what the future held for them as he lingered by the front door.

"Hey, loverboy! Let's go!" Devin's voice snapped Ryan out of his thoughts, and he quickly hopped into the front seat with a goofy grin. Devin glanced at his brother, pleased to see him happy with Christina. "It's about time. I was starting to think you'd never get the hint," Devin teased. Ryan scoffed in response, "Yeah, right! Like you pay attention to anything I do." "You might be surprised, little brother. You might be surprised," Devin said with a smirk, relieved to see Ryan's love life blossoming. "I'm glad things are going well for you," he added, hinting at his own troubles with Valerie. Ryan felt a pang of sympathy for his brother. All he could offer was a simple, "Sorry." Devin nodded, silently hoping things would eventually work out. *Sometimes, it just sucks.*

Around midnight, both brothers cautiously entered the house, their senses heightened by the faint murmurs emanating from their father's office. The atmosphere felt heavy and foreboding, as if the very air itself held secrets. Tiptoeing into the adjacent laundry room, they spotted Layla standing there, her figure silhouetted against the dim light filtering through the narrow window. It was the same window that had once kept away a chilling specter—a poltergeist that had smeared its gruesome tale upon the glass, haunting Ryan's memories.

"What are you doing, Layla?" Devin's voice cut through the tense silence. Layla turned to face her brothers with solemn expression, almost otherworldly. "I think this might be the way," she murmured cryptically.

Devin, the skeptic, pressed for clarity, “The way where?” His question hung in the air, unanswered, as Layla’s gaze shifted to Ryan, who felt a chill run down his spine. “The way to escape when darkness descends,” she whispered, her words dripping with an ominous weight. “Anna sees the end.”

Ryan’s heart skipped a beat as he clenched his jaw, a sense of impending dread settling over him like a suffocating shroud. He knew, with a primal certainty, something wicked loomed on the horizon—something that would coincide with the first full moon in two nights' time. It gnawed at his very soul, a silent harbinger of impending chaos.

As they exited the laundry room, the Hatcher siblings were greeted by a haunting figure looming over them from the staircase landing above. Lightning briefly illuminated the house, casting eerie shadows dancing upon the walls, revealing Calvin in his disheveled state, clad only in his boxers and an open robe. Ryan and Devin exchanged uneasy glances; their perceptions of their father forever altered by recent events. Eric’s transformation had shattered their illusions, leaving them to ponder the depths of their father's newfound capabilities.

Calvin drew in a sharp breath, his eyes ablaze with an intensity that sent shivers down their spines. Devin glanced at his watch, realizing they were fifteen minutes overdue. Breaking the tense silence, Calvin's voice, low and menacing, commanded, 'Go to bed.' His words were laden with unspoken implications, hanging heavily in the air like a dark omen.



# CHAPTER TWENTY

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# INBETWEEN DAYS

It was Sunday, it was dull, and the atmosphere somber.

Everyone's minds lingered on the unnecessary violence they had witnessed the night before. Whether they admitted it or not, Ryan's theory of something paranormal influencing Eric Flanagan loomed over them. They hadn't witnessed the brutality firsthand, and perhaps it was for the best. Too much strangeness had unfolded over the past three weeks for it all to be mere coincidence. Devin had always insisted Norton, Ohio, was the most boring place in the Midwest, but recent events had proven him wrong, though "interesting" was hardly the word Ryan would choose to describe the past month.

As Devin mopped Melvin Cragg's floor, he couldn't help but ponder the aftermath of Eric's rampage. He discovered, to his surprise, his neighbor actually had hardwood floors beneath the grime. Devin had been working on cleaning the interior of Melvin's house for two weeks now, and he was nearing the finish line. He no longer expected any compensation beyond a job well done from Melvin and his mother, who had roped him into helping in the first place.

"You could actually entertain guests now, Melvin," Devin remarked as he finished sweeping, bleaching, and mopping the neglected linoleum which hadn't seen replacement in close to two decades. Grumpily, Melvin muttered something unintelligible, prompting a smile from Devin, who imagined the choice expletives that might have slipped from his neighbor's lips. "Nobody cares about this place anymore," Melvin began as he hoisted himself off his chair. "Burned too many bridges, and I'm too old to make new friends. Nobody gives a damn about what this old geezer has to say."

Thanks to Devin's efforts, photos of Melvin's life now adorned the walls of his home, scattered throughout the house. Setting aside the mop, Devin leaned against the kitchen table, which once held nothing more than unread books destined for Melvin's neglected study shelves. "That's a stellar attitude to have," Devin quipped with a forced smile. Melvin didn't appreciate the direction Devin's sarcasm was taking. "Because now you have an excuse to keep pushing people away who could be beneficial to

know. But you know, life is short—or is it long? Especially if you waste it. It's those who harbor regrets, wishing for more time, who end up with the shorter days, right?" Devin retorted, throwing Melvin's own words back at him.

Craggs halted his steps, sighed, and gestured for Devin to follow him towards the garage, beckoning with his fingers. As they entered the garage, sunlight streamed through the opening. "Go ahead and take dat cover off there," Melvin instructed. Uncertain of what his neighbor had in mind, Devin removed the tarp, revealing the old motorcycle his mother had glanced at weeks before. Impressed, Devin exclaimed, "It looks like it's hardly been used!"

"Yeah, haven't taken it out in ages. Just fire it up and let it run. It's 'bout time it saw some real action," Melvin remarked. Devin ran his finger along the AJS emblem on the bike and knelt to inspect it, admitting he didn't know much about motorcycles. "Why don't you take it for a spin?"

Devin's eyebrows shot up with excitement and a hint of apprehension. He had never ridden a motorcycle before, and the thought filled him with a mix of anticipation and anxiety. "I'm not sure how to ride something like this," he confessed. Melvin waved his hand dismissively. "It's no big deal. It's like riding a bike, just heavier." Devin arched an eyebrow skeptically, doubting it was quite so straightforward.

Before he knew it, Devin found himself straddling the hunk of metal between his legs. "Just start it up like I showed ya!" Melvin yelled. Devin ignited the motorbike and released the clutch too early, causing him to wobble slightly but not enough to damage the vehicle. Melvin shook his head, realizing teaching Devin might be an uphill battle.

After several attempts, Devin finally managed to mount the motorcycle and began to cautiously ride it up the road, maneuvering down the adjacent cul-de-sac and back, nearly tipping over in the process. He steered into Melvin Cragg's driveway and celebrated. Melvin smiled and gave him a thumbs up, though he wasn't one to display emotions, especially in a celebratory manner. "What do ya think?" Melvin asked.

"It felt really nice with the wind in my face, you know?" Melvin did know, reminiscing about times long past. "You wanna ride it around for the day?"

"Are you serious?" Devin inquired, eager to take the bike for a spin around the neighborhood to flaunt something not his.



"Why not? I'll let you use it whenever you want, but you gotta stay in the neighborhood and fill it up. Not that you'd need to. It's got pretty good gas mileage," Melvin replied. "Oh and wear a helmet. Your momma will give me hell if ya don't." Devin agreed and shook his neighbor's hand before fetching the helmet from the garage. He already knew where he would go next on his semi-new ride.

Valerie felt isolated, barricaded in her room, sheltering herself from her father's wounded ego and fragile masculinity. She could hear her parents' incessant arguing echoing through the house, a recurring cycle of turmoil. Silvia Donovan had grown accustomed to both verbal and physical abuse, bearing the brunt of it while their children pretended ignorance, avoiding confrontation.

Now, there was no one around. Her school friends may have been physically present, but mentally, they seemed distant. Valerie had come to realize over the school year she didn't quite fit in with them. Despite her outward appearance—pretty, popular, and trendy—her life behind the scenes was starkly different. Her family, particularly her father, was deemed as white trash by their peers, a stigma which weighed heavily on Valerie. Even Eric had deserted her. While everyone else seemed to be evolving, her world remained stagnant.

Frustration and fear began to consume her. Tired of feeling deprived of life's pleasures, she directed her resentment towards her environment—her parents, their home, and the town itself. "My parents, this house, this damn town!" she seethed. A sudden urge for liberation surged within her, and as she gazed out the window, Valerie spotted her savior on a motorcycle, a familiar figure who lived nearby—someone who had always cherished her.

Devin Hatcher pulled up to the curb outside her house and caught sight of Valerie peering out the window. Removing his helmet, he flashed a warm smile at the enchanting figure on the other side of the glass and waved. From his perspective, she appeared excited. Feeling relieved, he donned his helmet once more as Valerie hurried to the garage to retrieve her own helmet, eager to join him. To his surprise, she dashed towards him—Devin, her knight in shining armor, rescuing her from her dark thoughts—and he relished the role.

"Where do you want to go?" Devin inquired as Valerie settled onto the back of the motorcycle, disregarding Mr. Cragg's advice to stay within the neighborhood. She positioned herself on the seat and replied, "Anywhere

away from here, where we can be alone." Devin nodded, thinking, *I have no objection to that.*

As they drove past Norton's only four corner intersection and turned right, they found themselves on a dead end road known as The Curvy Swervy. It was a spot frequented by high schoolers seeking solitude for various reasons, often leaning towards intimacy. It was Valerie's suggestion to visit there, and she directed Devin as he drove. Devin trusted her choice of location and went along for the ride.

Upon reaching the end overlooking the highway, Valerie made her way towards the fence, erected to prevent people from accidentally falling forward and tumbling down the hill into oncoming traffic. "Have you ever been to a high place, like the roof of a house or a small building and wondered if the fall would kill you?" she asked Devin. He walked up behind her to peer at the busy road below, pondering her question before responding, "No. I think about how much it would hurt if I survived."

Valerie took hold of Devin's hands and guided his arms to encircle her waist. "Are you okay?" he inquired, concerned.

She shrugged her shoulders and moaned, "I don't know," as she reached behind her, running her hands through his hair. "I just want to feel good again. Can you do that?" she asked, turning and nuzzling her nose against his neck. It felt good to Devin, erecting him as her hot breath moved over his skin. His eyes rolled back as Valerie placed his hands on her breasts. "Don't be afraid of me," she grinned with closed eyes, "I won't bite."

Devin kissed her hard, and she loved every moment of it. It was a dream come true, his teenage dream, making out with Valerie Donovan. She became overcome with excitement as she put her tongue down his throat and began to moan, hurting Devin's face. As his bottom lip began to leave from between hers, she bit down hard, causing it to bleed.

Stumbling over his feet, Devin pulled away, frightened. He had never imagined Valerie, who always came off as so sweet, could be this insatiable. The more she tried to grab onto his body, Devin became convinced the girl next door wasn't her anymore. This wasn't how he wanted to lose his virginity, and it wasn't going to be. Not on a dead end road in the middle of the street; a popular sex hangout—an area that could illuminate the sky if someone ran a blacklight over the ground from all the bodily fluids no doubt covering it.

“What is wrong with you?” he asked, concerned. Valerie began to unbutton her blouse and answered, “I just want to feel good. Just for a little while. I’m so tired of being alone.” She wanted validation and the only way she knew was for someone to reciprocate her advancements.

*You need to be aggressive! Males like that,* she told herself.

“I don’t like this part of you. This isn’t the person I know. What happened to you?” Devin asked, wiping the blood from his mouth. Valerie grew angry as tears rolled down her now red, windburned face, not understanding why Devin would reject her. “What are you? Some kind of faggot!” she yelled at him. Devin looked at her with wide, open eyes, seeing Valerie Donovan for who she was right now—a pit of insecurity and self-hate. He scoffed at her, cementing his rejection. Devin walked toward the motorcycle and began to put on the helmet.

Valerie’s anger began to fade into shame. She wasn’t sure what made her do and say such harsh things. She knew Devin wouldn’t look at her the same anymore. The admiration and respect had disappeared, at least for now. “Get on the bike,” he ordered her. She wiped tears from her face, and the rage within began to vanish, allowing her natural skin tone to return.

She wrapped her arms around him, but not as tight, placing her face against the back of his jacket, dreading the return home. Devin stopped in front of Valerie’s house and let her climb off. She looked at him, waiting for him to say something—anything. She placed her hands in the air, shrugged her shoulders and scoffed at her own ridiculousness, and asked with humility, “How do you like me now?”

Devin turned to her, unsure if he was upset at himself for not realizing who she was. He placed her on a pedestal, naïve and love struck, disappointed she acted like someone else because it was easier than coping with her own self-worth. “I don’t know what’s happening. Everything is different,” Devin explained. She agreed, noticing as well, even with herself.

“Look. I’m sorry. Come over Wednesday, and we’ll hang out. My parents are going to the festival thing like everyone else that night. We can hang out and watch a movie or go if you want...I’ll be normal, I promise.” Devin, attempting to be unflappable, sighed, asking, “Does that mean you’re not embarrassed about being around me by yourself?” Valerie shook her head aggressively, “Of course, I’m not.”

“Not sure if I can. May have to stay home and feed my pet,” he joked. Valerie smiled and decided to play along. “What pet?”

“My sister keeps looking for a cat. So there may be one in the house when I get home.”

“What kind?” Valerie wondered.

“Not sure.”

“You don’t know what kind of cat your sister is looking out for?” Devin slowly shook his head and joked, “No. Didn’t want to be nosy—respecting their privacy.”

They both laughed.

Valerie saw the light around Devin’s body as the sun began to set on another day. He was handsome, more than she had realized before, and a better person than Eric. *I wonder where he is*, they both had wondered.

“I’m sorry I called you...ya know.” Valerie apologized with sincerity. “If I had a buck every time somebody called me that in front of my face or behind my back, I wouldn’t have to worry about paying for my first year of college.” Valerie nodded and began to walk off to a home she didn’t want to be at, waving goodbye and telling him again to come by Wednesday night. He watched her open the door into her house, wondering if he was naïve or hopelessly in love.

Devin returned the bike to Melvin Cragg’ and unsurprisingly received an earful from the old man for taking it out of the neighborhood after asking him not to. He didn’t harp on it after Devin told him about the girl. Melvin knew he probably would have done the same thing at his age, trying to save the girl. *Men want to be someone’s Superman, not realizin’ they already are. Sometimes looks are deceivin’.*

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# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

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# DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME

Rebecca and Calvin Hatcher spent most of Sunday finishing the shed and transporting items from the garage to it. Ryan watched them from his window. Calvin worked slowly so Rebecca could keep up. For the most part, she was moving pretty well throughout the day, taking breaks more frequently than his dad. Ryan wasn't sure what he would discover, but he noticed some wire fencing being carried inside the shed, causing him to pause. *Why would they need fencing inside there?*

"I'm bored," Layla whined. "Nobody wants to play with me?" Ryan looked over and, with snark, asked, "Not even the girl in the pink dress?" Ryan didn't see his sister shake her head. He had become preoccupied with what his folks were doing outside. He knew there were too many conveniences happening at once—the three day trip, the shed, seemingly fortifying it as best they could.

*Too much is happening. But I hope I'm wrong. God, I hope I am wrong,* he pleaded to a deity he wasn't sure existed.

Devin forced himself to turn his body around to focus on something else, breathing in deep and exhaling. "What do you want to do?" He looked at Layla, holding up a small, pink rubber ball with a sly smirk, already knowing what she had in mind. *Man! We haven't played that in years!*

Layla skipped down the hall and sat on the hardwoods in front of the linen closet, while Devin didn't venture far and sat outside the kitchen entryway, legs crossed as Layla had hers. When they were younger, their game had no name, but when one of them showed up with a bouncy ball, they both knew it was on like Donkey Kong. It was their special thing because Devin was too old to appreciate it then, but it was fine with them.

The goal was to throw the tiny ball to the other person, only allowing it to bounce once. The rule was they couldn't stand to catch it. They could shift their bodies around but had to keep their legs crossed unless the ball went rogue; then, they could retrieve it if it bounced on the floor. If it ricocheted off a wall, the bounce was acceptable and didn't count towards the one. They both began throwing, springing the ball to one another, giggling when it went astray all over the hallway. The distance between

them was a good ten feet as they passed it to one another, trying to make the other one tip over onto their sides.

*Thunk*, Ryan bounced the ball off the wall, causing Layla to lean forward to catch it. "You just barely caught it!" he excitedly told her.

*Thump-thump*. Layla was disappointed in her throw. It was too light and caused the rubber ball to bounce twice. Ryan leaned forward to grab it as it rolled towards him. "I'll get you next time," she proclaimed.

Ryan brought his arm back with a rascally smile and threw it on the ground, hoping it would bounce off the ceiling and towards her. She saw it coming. Layla knew her brother's looks, and his next throw would be a doozy.

Spiking it towards the floor, Ryan immediately knew the ball would stop short, nowhere near his sister. They watched as it bounced off the ceiling and back towards the hardwoods. They both crawled closer to the landing point, waiting to be the first to grab the ball when they heard the bounce.

*Wait for it.*

Layla looked at Ryan, waiting for him to grab the rubber ball like he usually did. *That darn Ryan*, Layla would think sometimes, *he only gets it first because he's bigger!* Ryan didn't have the ball yet. He was still waiting for it to fall to the floor. They looked at one another, scared, knowing the ball should have landed near the stairwell—the one place where one of the five ghosts lingered in their home.

Ryan looked up, dreading what he would see.

The ball was levitating, stuck in the shadow of the nearly beheaded man lingering outside Layla's room. It looked downward at the piece of rubber as maggots fell from his body. Ryan froze with fear, staring at an older man in a suit surrounded by a cloud of black. The spirit did not concern Layla. Instead, she rose to her feet and stomped over to it, demanding, "Give us back our ball!" The man didn't respond, floating in the air.

"Did you hear me? I said, give me the ball back. It's not yours!" Layla's patience wore thin with these apparitions and their games. "Say something!"

She reached out her hand, determined to retrieve her toy from the darkness. "No! Layla! Don't!" Ryan's voice echoed with urgency as he watched his sister step closer, her arm extending into the ghoul's shadowy figure. Layla grabbed the ball and swiftly withdrew her hand, but not before



the entity grasped her arm. A scream escaped her lips as they made physical contact, a sensation they had never experienced before.

The entity twisted to face Layla, its decayed appearance more grotesque than ever. With a forceful motion, it flung Layla across the hall towards Ryan, who caught her just before they hit the floor. As it turned back around, its head fell forward with a sickening sound, rolling towards them. Its eyes opened wide, bloodshot and bulging, sending shivers down the siblings' spines. They screamed in horror as the decapitated head stared back at them, the man's voice echoing with fear and confusion, warning them, *"You can't go this way! Not this! You'll pay if you go...the wrong way!"*

Ryan covered his sister's eyes with his hands, shutting his own tightly as the voice gradually faded, echoing in the room. When they finally opened their eyes, they saw the rubber ball bouncing before coming to rest near the stairs. Exhausted, they remained on the floor, trying to calm their racing hearts and collect their scattered thoughts, until Devin entered the room. "What's happening?" Devin inquired, perplexed by their prone positions in the living room. "It's nothing you'd want to know," Ryan replied, breathless. Layla, still miffed, stood up and marched away, muttering, "Grown-ups never listen anyway." Devin glanced at Ryan, puzzled by Layla's behavior. Ryan shrugged, reiterating what everyone, except their parents, seemed to already know.

"There's something strange in our neighborhood. Something's off, and somehow, it involves us. But for some reason, only Layla and I seem to notice." Devin extended a hand to help his brother up from the floor, silently doubting the validity of Ryan's claims. *He won't believe me. I should just drop it.*

"Have Mom and Dad been at the shed all day?" Devin deflected, redirecting the conversation. Ryan shook his head wearily. They made their way to Ryan's bedroom, ready to delve into their ongoing discussions. The brothers conversed as equals, with Ryan sharing even the details about him and Christina. Since the topic shifted to girls, Devin opened up about Valerie and her recent changes. "Just promise me you'll stay vigilant. I hope I'm just paranoid, but if not, you need to keep watch—on Eric and on Valerie," Devin urged, emphasizing the importance. Ryan nodded solemnly as they continued discussing the events of the past few weeks.

Amidst their conversation, which had now shifted to their favorite movies, Ryan and Devin were interrupted by music wafting up from downstairs. It was late for their parents to still be working in the backyard. Ryan stealthily crept downstairs while Devin ventured into the kitchen to inspect their revamped shed. Peering through the vertical blinds to survey the surroundings, Devin was pleasantly surprised to see the renovation complete, no longer an eyesore. Wondering where his brother had disappeared to, Devin made his way back toward the stairs, following the sound of the familiar music.

*"My hands are tied, my body bruised, she got me with nothing to win and nothing left to lose,"* the lyrics echoed through the house as the record played on.

Devin found Ryan perched at the top of the second flight of stairs, silently observing their parents as they danced together. Their mother appeared weary and fragile, while Calvin seemed revitalized, a stark contrast. It struck Devin as profoundly unjust. The woman who had always been their rock was now the one suffering, while the man who had often been absent was granted a second chance. Though neither of them were particularly religious, Devin couldn't help but wonder if there was some greater purpose to it all.

Meanwhile, Ryan watched their parents with a sense of melancholy, pondering if this would be their final dance together. The brothers observed their parents sharing a moment unlike any they had witnessed before—not merely as mom and dad, but as two individuals, connecting in a fleeting moment until the song's end.

*I can't live...with or without you.*

Layla sat on her bed, clutching her tiny rubber ball, scrutinizing it for any signs of alteration, but finding none. With a shiver of fear, she tossed the ball out of her room, hearing it thud against the front door after bouncing down the stairs.

Frustrated, Layla abandoned the ball and turned to her dolls for comfort before bedtime. She arranged them in a circle, with Teddy Ruxpin at the center, ready to recount one of Layla's favorite stories, *The Airship*. As the animatronic bear began to speak, Layla listened attentively, propping herself up on her elbows.

Unexpectedly, the room filled with the eerie sound of bouncing. The pink rubber ball had returned, landing with a soft thud within the circle of

dolls. Layla's heart raced as she cautiously approached the edge of her room, peering into the darkness beyond. There, on the stairs, stood another ghostly figure—a young boy, his face contorted in anguish. But unlike the previous apparition, this one was horrifically mutilated, with gaping wounds and entrails spilling out onto the steps.

As Layla recoiled in horror, Teddy Ruxpin's soothing voice abruptly ceased, replaced by a low, guttural growl. The mechanical bear's eyes glowed with an otherworldly intensity, fixating on Layla with a malevolent gaze. "You can't go this way! Not this! You'll pay if you go...the wrong way!" The toy's warning echoed through the room, each repetition sending shivers down Layla's spine.

In the dim light, the toy dolls surrounding Teddy Ruxpin moved their heads, their plastic eyes gleaming with malice as they teetered on the edge of the circle. With a sense of impending dread, Layla frantically searched for Anna and her pink dress, her hands trembling as she realized she was no longer alone in the room.

"I don't like this. This isn't fun anymore," Layla whispered, her voice barely audible over the growing cacophony of malevolent whispers and ghostly moans.



# CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

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# BLUE MONDAY

The day was draped in darkness and solemnity. Overcast skies bore heavy clouds, and rain cascaded in a steady rhythm, its pitter-patter echoing through the leaves that clung desperately to the trees. Ryan made his way to school on Monday morning, each step a weary trudge, feeling numb and disconnected, his mind burdened by a lack of sleep. The atmosphere on the bus mirrored his mood, heavy with silence, each passenger but Colin wrapped in their own thoughts.

Breakfast at home was a quiet affair, with Devin and Layla exchanging wordless glances as they ate their cereal. When their parents asked what was wrong, the Hatcher kids remained silent, their thoughts lingering on the events of the previous day. There was an unspoken understanding among them, a shared burden which weighed heavily on their hearts.

The dreary weather only added to Ryan's sense of foreboding. He couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom, knowing the full moon was just around the corner. The thought of his father turning into a werewolf filled him with dread, and the knowledge he couldn't do anything to stop it left him feeling helpless.

Even Christina, usually full of energy, seemed worn out and weary. She tried to lighten the mood with a joke, but Ryan could see the exhaustion in her eyes. They were all struggling to cope with the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

Colin, ever curious, peppered Ryan with questions, while Scott tried to maintain his usual bravado, despite the gossip swirling around him. But amidst the chaos of high school drama, Ryan couldn't shake the feeling something darker lurked beneath the surface.

The spirits haunting him, and Layla seemed to be growing more aggressive, their presence more ominous than ever before. Ryan couldn't help but feel Layla held the key to unlocking the mystery, her silence speaking volumes. *She knows more than she lets on.* As the day wore on, his anxiety only grew, a heavy weight pressing down on his chest, threatening to suffocate him.

"Do you want me to come home with you?" Christina asked Ryan, sensing his reluctance to return home. Despite the temptation, Ryan declined. "No. Whatever's going on there, I need to figure it out. I don't want you mixed up in all the crazy stuff." Confused, Christina inquired, "What stuff?" Ryan shook his head, replying, "I'll tell you after this week. I promise. There's a chance I'm losing it, and I need to be sure before I say anything weirder to my girlfriend."

"Because declaring werewolves exist isn't weird already?" Christina retorted sarcastically, prompting Ryan to offer a disingenuous smirk. He knew she had a point. Adding ghosts to the mix would only complicate things further. The term "girlfriend" slipped out naturally when referring to Christina, *woah*, his longtime friend. Ryan chuckled to himself, leaving her puzzled. "Nothing. Just a moment of clarity," he reassured her, then leaned in to kiss her hand.

Christina tugged at his collar, drawing him closer before resting her head against his chest. The scent of citrus and lavender emanated from her blonde hair as he gazed down at her blue cardigan, draping his coat over her shoulders while she ran her fingers along his back. Despite the dropping temperature outside, neither of them seemed to mind. These quiet, secluded moments on the deserted roads and in the surrounding woods had become their sanctuary, though they hadn't fully realized it yet. In the grand scheme of things, these seemingly insignificant moments would be cherished memories as they grew older. It's often only with the passage of time we come to appreciate the simple joys in life amidst the chaos.

"Call me later," she whispered before pulling away to head home. "Remember, nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood. My grandma used to say that, quoting some writer or something." Ryan flashed her a thumbs up, eliciting a smile from Christina as she walked away. It was sage advice, but Ryan couldn't shake the thought, delving too deep into understanding could lead to danger.

Ryan sat across from his sister, poking at his quarter pounder meal, unable to shake the feeling a conversation looming. Layla kept shooting him pointed looks, silently urging him to broach the subject sooner rather than later. But Layla was hesitant to dive into it. She wasn't even sure she could explain it herself. Anna, the ghost girl who resided in her room, had warned Layla to keep quiet, but there was another presence involved. Ryan had always been intertwined somehow. Layla had never fully realized it,

spending most of her time in her room, which served as her sanctuary, her refuge from the harsh realities of the outside world.

Their parents, engrossed in their meals of chicken nuggets, burgers, and piping hot fries, seemed oblivious to Ryan's intense gaze. The sound of their chewing grated his nerves, each gnaw feeling amplified as if it were reverberating off the walls. As Ryan watched the meat disappear between their teeth, he couldn't shake the unsettling image of raw human flesh. With each swallow, he half expected his father's face to contort into a snarling werewolf.

*Ryan?*

The voice echoed ominously in the background.

Turning from his father, Ryan's attention was drawn to strange animalistic noises emanating from around the table. A gasp escaped his lips as he recoiled in horror, sinking back into his seat. His family members mutated into grotesque, snarling werewolves. They rummaged through the remnants of their meal from the golden arches, their primal instincts driving them to scavenge for any remaining scraps of meat.

But these creatures didn't sound like wild beasts; their growls and snarls were eerily human, a twisted mockery of their former selves. Each howl echoed with their own voices, a desperate plea for more sustenance. Ryan's parents and brother, now towering adult sized werewolves with demonic features reminiscent of the unfortunate man they had encountered on Halloween night, loomed over him menacingly.

Only Layla remained smaller, resembling a wolf cub, her innocent appearance belying the menace in her bared teeth as she glared at Ryan, poised to strike.

As the food dwindled to nothing, the werewolves ceased their scavenging, their hungry gazes turning towards him. With a collective growl, they clambered onto the table with unnaturally elongated limbs and fingers, slowly encircling their prey. Paralyzed with fear, Ryan pleaded with himself to move, tears streaming down his cheeks in rivulets of terror. But it was futile.

As they descended upon him, tearing into his flesh with savage abandon, he could only watch in silent horror as his family tore him apart, feeling excruciating pain as his limbs were rent asunder and his flesh devoured. Helpless and resigned to his gruesome fate, he surrendered to the



nightmarish reality unfolding before him, knowing there was no escape from the clutches of his evil kin.

"Ryan!" his real mother's voice cut through his thoughts like a knife. Startled, he spouted, "What?" Rebecca recoiled at his tone, her expression stern. "Watch yo tongue, young man. I asked ya a question." "Sorry, what?" Calvin shot his wife a glance, wondering if she noticed their son's distracted demeanor. Devin, too, glanced at Ryan, concern etched on his face. Ryan's preoccupation with things only seen in movies had taken its toll, both mentally and physically. He had lost his appetite and started muttering to himself, lost in his own world. It hadn't gone unnoticed by the family, but they had chalked it up to typical teenage behavior.

"Are you going to the festival with everyone on Wednesday night?" Rebecca asked, a hint of impatience in her voice. Ryan had forgotten about the festival and the plans his friends had made. "Your brother is going to the Donovan's for dinner, and they're going afterward. Isn't Christina and Colin going too? I thought I heard you mention it," she continued. Still shaken from his unsettling daydream, he shrugged, muttering he didn't know. "You should go. It might be fun," Calvin chimed in, hoping to coax Ryan out of his funk. "It'll be getting cold soon, and you won't want to go out as much." Ryan nodded vaguely, "I'll think about it," not wanting to make a big deal out of attending the festival. "I think I'm going to lie down. Excuse me," he announced before leaving the kitchen, leaving his family puzzled and concerned.

Only Devin and Layla realized something was amiss, leaving his parents clueless. Alone in his room, Ryan stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. The wallpaper adorned with vintage cars from the thirties mocked him, a reminder of his family's lack of understanding. He felt more isolated than ever, regretting ever voicing his fears about werewolves or what resides in his home.

"Why do you want me to make these pictures?" Layla's voice echoed through the vents, reaching Ryan's ears as he lay in bed. The muffled conversation stirred agitation within him. The spirits, the looming threat of the werewolf curse, and Layla's silence about her own struggles gnawed at his sanity.

With a surge of frustration, Ryan stormed down the hall to Layla's room, ignoring the comforting glow of the television downstairs where his parents were engrossed in ALF. Bursting into Layla's room without warning, Ryan's

presence startled her. Wide eyed, Layla glanced nervously at her dresser before meeting his gaze. "Where is she?" his voice a low growl, filled with urgency. Layla hesitated, unsure of how to respond. "Did I scare her off?" Ryan pressed, his tone intensifying. Her fearful nod only fueled his frustration. As his eyes fell on her Lite Brite set and the sheets of black paper, Ryan's impatience boiled over.

Snatching the papers, Ryan flipped through them, his mind racing to decipher their meaning. They weren't drawings but mere holes in black paper. "Give 'em back!" Layla's voice trembled as she reached for the papers, but Ryan kept them out of her grasp. "What are these?" Ryan's voice was cold, demanding answers. Layla insisted they were just pictures, but he knew better. *These are more than just pictures.* Determined to unravel the mystery, Ryan seized the Lite Brite set and dismantled it, revealing the bulb beneath. Layla's protests fell on deaf ears as Ryan directed the light towards the ceiling, illuminating a pattern of puncture dots created on the sheets of thin construction paper.

"What is this?" Ryan's voice sliced through the tension, his eyes narrowing in concern. Trembling, Layla lifted her gaze and whispered, "That's the hallway outside." "Is that supposed to be the stairs next to it?" His tone softened, sensing Layla's fear. Layla nodded, her hands still, relinquishing her struggle to retrieve the picture. "And what about this circle with the line below it?"

Ryan's curiosity was tinged with apprehension. "That's the man in front of the hallway," Layla explained quietly, her voice barely audible. "You poked holes making an X. How come?"

"Because that way isn't the way to go," she said, gently pulling the paper from his grasp. Ryan pulled out another sheet, revealing three stick figures under a platform.

"What about this?"

"That's us under the deck," Layla explained, her eyes reflecting her fear. He glanced back at the picture above, confusion knitting his brow. "Why are we under the deck?" Layla hesitated, her gaze flickering with uncertainty. "I think we're hiding."

"You made it! How can you not know what you made?"

"I don't make these for me! I do it for Anna! She tells me, and I make it!" Layla cried, her voice trembling with emotion. Feeling guilty for his outburst, Ryan pulled another sheet from the pile. He noticed two stairs

resembling their home and the landing between an X over the front door. “Is going through the door not the way?” he calmly inquired, a chill creeping over him as he remembered the dolls toppling over when Layla attempted different routes days prior. She shook her head, her voice barely above a whisper. “I think one of us will get hurt if we do.” Examining one last picture, depicting them in front of the blue spruce tree in the yard, Ryan's expression softened. “What are they telling us? What will happen if we don't do what they're telling us?” he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Layla nervously chewed on her fingers; her eyes wide with fear. “I think something is going to want to hurt us really bad, Ryan! I'm scared! They don't want to hurt us. They're here to warn us...to tell us where to go!” Layla cried, her voice breaking. “Why are they telling us to stay away from those doors?” Ryan's voice was gentle as he tried to calm his sister's fears. Layla's eyes darted around her room; her breath shaky. “Because when they died... no one told them which way to go!”

THE  
COLD  
MOON



# CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# OWNER OF A LONELY HEART

“You need to talk to dad while you still can,” Ryan urged his brother, noticing their parents packing for an overnight trip. “I think you are paranoid—nothing’s going to happen to them...or him,” Devin retorted confidently. “Even if I believe in your wolf idea or any psychic ability, I don’t have anything to say to him.” Ryan began to leave Devin’s room when a memory resurfaced, something his mother told him a week prior when he debated on going to Colin’s party. “Maybe you need to realize it’s not all about you,” Ryan said.

“The hell did you just say to me?” he snapped, hoping their parents overheard. Ryan shook his head, undeterred, “Mom won’t be around forever.”

Devin tossed his headphones onto his bed. “Don’t talk like that!” Ryan stood his ground, fed up with the constant tension between them. “It’s true, and you know it! I’m tired of tiptoeing around the truth. Why am I the only one trying to come to terms with this? Let’s assume I’m wrong, and dad is normal. Then what? He’s still going to be around. Can you at least acknowledge he’s trying? Can you do something to make mom feel a little better? Can you be a man for a moment? I shouldn’t be the one to do it, but you’re so wrapped up in yourself, avoiding everything!”

Ryan clenched his jaw, a realization dawning on him. Suppose dad is a threat, and they have to stop him? In that case, they could lose both parents.

Devin took a step back, making excuses. “I’ve been busy!” Ryan scoffed and walked away, “Yeah, busy avoiding your responsibilities. You spent weeks cleaning out an old man’s house for nothing. It wasn’t out of the goodness of your heart.”

“I did it because mom asked me to!” Devin shouted.

“You did it to get away from us!”

Exhausted from the argument, Ryan left Devin and went downstairs to watch TV. As he watched reruns, he mulled over his parents’ departure. What if dad turns and hurts mom? It was a scenario he had never seriously considered before. *Maybe I have been too preoccupied with werewolves and*

*ghosts*. Calvin brought down luggage, and Ryan commented, “Seems like a lot for a couple of days.”

Calvin paused, looking upstairs, then at Ryan. “It’s your mom. She’s always been like this. Thinks she’s going to need everything. High maintenance, I tell her, but she just shrugs it off.” Ryan smiled, wondering if he had been wrong about his dad all along. Maybe they were just going away for some quality time together—one last time.

Around four in the afternoon, Calvin and Rebecca called their kids downstairs to say goodbye. Layla bounded down the stairs first, putting on a cheerful facade for her parents. Ryan reluctantly rose from the couch and approached, unsure if he would ever see his parents again. The embrace lasted longer than usual, amplifying Ryan's anxiety.

Struggling to contain his emotions, Ryan's eyes welled up with tears. “What’s wrong, bud?” his dad inquired. Using his long sleeved shirt to dab his eyes, Ryan shook his head, fabricating an excuse. “It's just you guys have never been away for so long. I mean, I know it's not long, but it feels like it to me...to us.” Layla clung to Calvin's leg, trying to delay his departure by playfully dragging her across the floor. Unaware of her brother's concerns about the wolf curse, she simply knew there were lingering presences in the house. “Why do you have to go?” Layla whimpered.

“Married people need time alone together,” Rebecca explained. “We’ll be back before you know it. Be good for your brothers while we’re away, alright?” Layla reluctantly agreed, her usually good behavior not being a concern.

Calvin glanced upstairs, hoping to hear Devin coming down. However, the floors remained silent. “Alright then,” their father sighed, disappointed by Devin's absence, “I guess we’re off.” After a final hug, they left, but it wasn’t enough for Layla and Ryan. They followed them outside and watched as they started the red Mazda and pulled out of the garage.

A noise echoed from above, signaling Devin's change of heart as he dashed from his room to the garage. He rushed past his siblings and approached the car on the passenger side where his mother sat. Rebecca rolled down the window, waiting for her oldest to speak. There was a tense silence before Devin finally spoke up. “So, when will you be back on Thursday?”



“Probably around noon, if I had to guess,” Calvin replied. Devin nodded, then continued, “Are you sure you've got everything you need?” They exchanged smiles, recognizing Devin's attempt to be helpful and mature.

“There's money in an envelope on the kitchen counter and some lasagna in the fridge for you to heat up and buy a pizza for yourselves,” Rebecca told him. Devin nodded again, giving a thumbs up to the meal plan for the next two nights. “Are you alright?” Calvin asked. Devin pondered Ryan's theory about the curse and their mother's possible fate. He felt the pressure to be strong and reliable, but he began to question whether it was necessary anymore.

“Just, ya know, be careful. Cleveland and all...ya know?” Devin's voice cracked as he offered his caution as an excuse to talk to them. They both nodded in response, offering crooked smiles in appreciation of his concern. With a heartfelt nod and teary eyes, Rebecca rolled up her window, and they drove away. Calvin and Rebecca Hatcher navigated down Greengate Lane, and just before they turned onto Wadsworth Road, Rebecca's mouth quivered, her efforts to hold back tears evident. Calvin rubbed her back reassuringly before making the turn. He stole a brief glance at her, aware that seeing his wife cry would only stir his own emotions. However, Rebecca's tears weren't solely for herself or him; they were tears of relief, signaling the rekindling of communication among everyone, even if only to a limited extent. It was a small step, but at least Rebecca harbored the hope that it was possible before she departed this world. Now, she had to attend to matters with her husband.

“What did you say to them?” Ryan wondered as his brother walked past Ryan and Layla. Without pausing to look at either of them, Devin replied, “Told them goodbye.” He never knew if taking the time to see his parents off was a sign of respect. He wanted to let them know, in his own way, he would do better. Then he began to wonder if Ryan's theory might have been correct. They wouldn't know until the news came tomorrow if another person had died from a vicious animal attack.

All three siblings remained indoors, barely speaking to one another. There was nothing more Ryan could say, all he could do was flip through the thin, punctured pages Layla had created alongside an entity hiding in her room. Placing the papers next to one another, he hoped to understand and follow the path revealed to them if the time came. This would have

been the night to cut loose and break some rules, but they had no plans for hijinks. Simply getting through the nights, waiting for their parents to come home, was enough.

They settled on a pan pizza from Pizza Hut accompanied by breadsticks and a two-liter of Pepsi for the evening. Devin, true to his solitary nature, retreated to his room with his share of the meal, engaging in conversation with Valerie on the other end of the line. They discussed her suggestion of inviting him over for dinner at her place before heading to the fair the following night. Their conversation also drifted to Eric's whereabouts, as he had been missing since the party on Saturday. They wondered if he would ever resurface. Eric Flanagan had become a mere shadow of his former self since Halloween, lending further credence to Ryan's theory. He had grown calmer, less volatile, and surprisingly invested in school, but there remained a darkness within him. Before ending their call, they reminded each other to be cautious and to remain vigilant.

They had been engrossed in conversation for hours when Layla finally succumbed to sleep, her head resting on her brother's lap. After attempting to decipher the cryptic pictures to the best of their ability, her exhaustion got the better of her. Ryan gently lifted her and tucked her into bed, switching off the Tinkerbelle lamp before whispering a soft goodnight. As he stepped out into the hallway and prepared to close the door, he noticed a figure standing by Layla's dresser, shrouded in darkness.

Though dimly lit, Ryan could discern the pink dress described by his sister and the burning red hair matching dried blood down her leg. Ryan closed his eyes momentarily, hoping when he opened them again, the apparition would vanish as it had in the past. To his dismay, she remained. With a heavy sigh, Ryan maintained his gaze on the ghostly figure, unmoving, lingering in the shadows. "I hope you're right," he whispered to the spectral presence before closing the door. *I hope to God you're right.*



# CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

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# MIRROR IN THE BATHROOM

*Recompense. For all my crimes are self-defense.*

Following his brutal attack on Saturday, the local authorities began searching for Eric Flanagan, though their efforts were lackluster, typical of the Akron police assigned to suburban areas. Unbeknownst to anyone, Eric slipped into his house once a day while his father dozed off in his favorite lounge in the mornings. Despite the urgency of his situation, Eric's adrenaline surges negated any immediate need for sustenance. While it would have been simple to grab a bag of Doritos or some prepackaged cheese slices, nothing appealed to him except the slab of steak thawing in the refrigerator. A voice urged him to consume it raw, but his civility rebelled. He was well aware his body was undergoing changes, but it wasn't until the day of the first full moon the extent became apparent.

His heart raced, his muscles throbbed, yet he couldn't remain still. An insatiable hunger gnawed at him, urging him to feed on food he had no desire for, merely to stave off hunger. Surprisingly, surviving in the woods for the past three days hadn't been as challenging as anticipated. The only real inconvenience was the persistent dampness of his body and clothes, saturated with sweat.

Occasionally, woodland creatures would dart in front of him, capturing all his attention. His focus narrowed on the animal, blocking out the surroundings. A bunny hopped nearby as he attempted to relax. Its ears perked up at the rustling bushes from where it emerged, and Eric's senses heightened, detecting the blood coursing through its veins. He listened intently to its rapidly beating heart, observing the pulsating veins throughout its diminutive frame. Slowly, he began to crawl on all fours toward it, but before he could make a move, the bunny darted away. Eric growled in frustration, vexed by his own instincts and the persistent hunger pains.

*You will get what you need.*

*You will hunt and feed as you have never known.*

*You will be fulfilled.*

*You will learn patience.*

*You will change.*

*You will become apex.*

Eric tugged at his shirt, feeling as though it were suffocating him, his muscles straining as if he had overexerted himself. "It hurts so bad!" he yelled, but the voice that had spoken earlier remained silent for the rest of the day. Desperate for any type of comfort, Eric's instincts drove him back to the familiarity of his home, his bed. He sprinted through the woods, intent on reaching his house. Crawling through his bedroom window, he discarded his clothes onto the floor and collapsed into bed, wrapping himself in the quilt his mother had crafted before her passing. Shivering uncontrollably, he endured the discomfort until his father's movements in the living room signaled the start of his nightly binge drinking.

Conor Flanagan's shadow flitted back and forth beneath Eric's door as he aimlessly wandered the house. A man who believed he had nothing left in his life, Conor had become weary of television and alcohol but continued to indulge out of habit. Communication with his son had ceased long ago, convinced Eric's attitude could never be rectified after his wife's death. Resorting to physical violence had become Conor's only means of asserting control over his disobedient son.

When the police arrived at their house in search of Eric, Conor saw an opportunity to rid himself of his son's presence, hoping they would handle the situation so he wouldn't have to. Unemployment had rendered Conor lazy and self-absorbed, and he believed Eric's absence might be the best outcome for both of them. As he watched his father's shadow, Eric silently prayed his father would not enter his room.

The sound of a soda can tipping over echoed through the silence, catching Conor's attention in an instant. Eric, parched from days of neglecting his body's basic needs, grabbed the old Pepsi can, desperate for any liquid, even if it meant drinking his own backwash. Conor's ears perked up at the noise emanating from the kitchen as he scrounged for a snack, settling on a forgotten stick of beef jerky tucked away in a cabinet. His paranoia heightened without the numbing effects of alcohol, especially after reading about the recent deaths in the area. Gripping his double-barreled shotgun, Conor cautiously approached Eric's room, his senses on high alert, prepared to defend his home at all costs.

As the sun began its descent, Eric's discomfort intensified, beads of sweat formed on his brow. With a sense of urgency, he hastily dressed,

silently slipping back into his sweaty clothes, his mind racing with thoughts of seeking medical help. Unbeknownst to him, an infection far more insidious than any physical ailment ravaged his body—a sickness consuming not just flesh, but mind and soul.

Conor grappled with the decision of how to approach his son's room, torn between caution and aggression. Should he open the door slowly, risking detection and potential gunfire, or should he opt for a swift entry, hoping to catch the intruder off guard? Resolving to trust his instincts, Conor counted down, his grip tightening on the shotgun.

Two...

One...

Meanwhile, Eric hastily buttoned his jeans, opting to layer up with a sweater and jacket, his only protection against the encroaching chill of the night. Before he could finish dressing, the door exploded inward, the top hinge splintering under Conor's forceful kick. Frozen in shock, Eric found himself staring down the barrel of his father's shotgun, his heart pounding in his chest as he raised his hands in surrender.

"The hell have you been, boy?" Conor bellowed, his anger palpable, his gaze narrowing on his weakened son—a prime target for his pent-up frustrations. "The police were here, asking questions about you and some damn party. Said you hurt some kid, crushed his hand."

Struggling to maintain composure, Eric fumbled for his sweater, his movements sluggish from exhaustion. "Nothing. I'm leaving," he murmured, his voice barely audible above the chaos unfolding around him. Ignoring his father's inquiries, Eric pushed past him, his mind set on escape.

But Conor wasn't about to let him off easy. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" he demanded, bewildered by his son's erratic behavior. With a mixture of defiance and resignation, Eric finally turned to face his father, his frustration boiling over. "Why do you care?" he spat, his tone laced with bitterness. "Tell me, Dad, why should I believe you give a fuck about me?"

Conor's grip on the shotgun loosened slightly as he scoffed at his son's audacity. "You've been growin' a spine, haven't you? Maybe you soaked up too much of your mother's nonsense. Maybe I underestimated you." Eric's chuckle was laced with pain, sweat trickling down his face as he grimaced and clutched his side.

"Wrong since Mom died, huh?" Eric's words hung heavy in the air, each syllable a dagger aimed at Conor's heart. Father and son locked eyes, a

silent battle raging between them. Conor licked his lips, steeling himself for the verbal onslaught he was about to unleash. "Should've been you," he spat, the venom in his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. "Your mom was a saint. She kept me in line, and now I'm stuck with an ungrateful brat. Big goddamn disappointment."

Eric's response was swift, his nostrils flaring with rage as he bared his teeth. "I know you do. I know you wish it was me," he retorted, each word dripping with contempt. "You squandered everything she worked for, Dad. You stopped giving a damn. She'd be ashamed of you. A worthless, drunken, abusive waste of space. I wouldn't even use your face to wipe my ass." Eric's words were a long awaited release, each insult a cathartic strike against his father's ego.

The room crackled with tension as father and son faced off, their words hanging in the air like a toxic cloud.

The shotgun wavered in Conor's grip, the barrels inching upward towards Eric's head as his father's scowl deepened. "Get out of my house before I do something I regret," Conor growled, his voice laced with menace.

"I thought you already did," Eric retorted, his tone dripping with disdain as he limped past his father, his body wracked with pain. He refused to let Conor see him any more vulnerable, refusing to give him the satisfaction.

With a violent motion, Eric flung open the bathroom door, the sound of it slamming against the counter echoing through the house. He slammed the door shut in his father's face, the click of the lock a final barrier between them. Conor rattled the doorknob furiously, his fists pounding against the wood. "Open the door, Eric!" he bellowed, his anger palpable. "When I get in there, I'm gonna make you regret it!"

Eric leaned against the counter, forcing composure, his hand slamming flat against the surface as he struggled to contain the agony coursing through his body. He dry heaved into the sink, bile rising in his throat. Glancing at his reflection in the mirror, he froze, horror spreading across his features as he watched his eyes change. His pupils narrowed, elongating into ovals, as amber-colored shards crystallized within his green irises. Hair sprouted from his skin, his hands contorting and elongating before his eyes. With a primal scream of agony, Eric realized something was happening to his body, his cries reverberating through the house, a harbinger of the transformation to come.



Conor froze, his heart pounding in his chest as he listened to the conversion unfolding behind the bathroom door. Eric's agonizing cries turned into guttural moans, sending shivers down Conor's spine. He fumbled for his shotgun, his hands shaking with fear and anticipation. Each thud against the floor sounded like a death knell, echoing through the silent house.

With bated breath, Conor pressed his ear against the door, straining to hear over the pounding of his own heartbeat. He could hear the heavy panting, the scraping of claws against tile, and then... silence. His heart lurched in his chest as he whispered, "Eric, are you alright?" The concern in his voice was genuine, a rare moment of vulnerability amidst the chaos.

The bathroom door burst open with violent force, hurling Conor against the wall. The shotgun discharged, its deafening blast echoing through the room. As Conor fought to regain his bearings, he was confronted with a sight that chilled him to the core.

In the doorway stood not his son, but an animal brimming with hatred and rage. Towering over him, it bore little resemblance to the boy Conor once knew, save for a few strands of red hair. With menacing teeth and shining fur, it radiated a terrifying presence, sending waves of dread coursing through Conor's veins.

Tears streamed down Conor's face as he realized the truth of what had become of his family. "This isn't you," he pleaded, his voice breaking with sorrow. But as he met the creature's amber eyes, he knew his words fell on deaf ears. The beast before him was a manifestation of his failures, a reminder of the darkness which lurked within. And as it loomed over him, Conor could only pray for forgiveness for the sins that had brought them to this moment. The kindness comes out when the filth is faced with death.

*...Yes, it is.*

The enormous beast loomed over Conor, its snarls echoing through the darkened hallway as it bore down on him with relentless fury. With each swipe of its razor sharp claws, it shredded the door above Conor, slicing through the wood like butter and gouging deep wounds into his flesh.

Conor's screams pierced the air, a symphony of agony and terror as he fought desperately to free himself from the creature's grasp. But with each attempt, he only succeeded in driving the beast into a frenzy, its bloodlust fueled by his fear and pain.

"Stop it, Eric! Stop!" Conor yelled as tears and snot poured from his eyes and nose, his voice choked with anguish and desperation.

The giant wolf nipped at Conor's right hand, piercing through the skin to bone, craving the taste of human blood and meat for the first time. Conor pulled his hand forward away from him as its tooth ran through his flesh through the webbing between his pointer and middle finger.

Then, kicking the door off of him with the strength he could muster, Conor escaped, falling every time he made it to his feet. "Leave me alone!" he screamed, his voice hoarse and filled with terror.

Eric's werewolf shape stood back on its hind legs and began to slowly stalk Conor, watching him stumble, screaming for it to leave him alone. "What do you want from me?" Conor cried, his voice trembling with fear as he backed from the advancing creature.

The wolf was not frail like the one who had scratched him those weeks ago. He was more prominent, heavier, and had more muscle than bone, making him harder to kill.

Conor began to put everything together now—the attack, his son's recovery—*somehthin' from the movies*. Conor's heart pounded in his chest as he dashed to the front door, his hands trembling as he grasped the baseball bat he had kept around for years. It was meant for him and his son to play baseball together, but it had remained untouched in the corner with the umbrellas, gathering dust in the darkness of neglect. Occasionally, Conor had entertained the idea of going outside to play with his son, but he consistently dismissed it, convinced he was too old, and that Eric wouldn't want to spend time with his old man. However, now, as he confronted the grotesque creature that had once been his son, Conor wished he had seized those moments while he still could.

The wolf watched with hungry eyes as Conor swung the bat in front of him, trying to keep the creature at bay long enough to make his escape. Strands of saliva dripped from the werewolf's gaping jaws, splattering onto the furniture and floor as it growled menacingly, its primal instincts driving it to hunt down its prey.

Conor's swing connected with a piercing crack as the bat struck his son's left arm, but the creature barely flinched. Instead, it retaliated with a swift swipe of its claws, slicing open Conor's left arm releasing sprays of blood. As Conor stumbled backward, the beast lunged forward, seizing him by the side and hurling his body against the bay window, shattering the glass.

Pain coursed through Conor's body, but he no longer could muster a shout. Knowing his fate was sealed, he resigned himself to it as he struggled to stand, his gaze locked with the eyes of the creature. There were no words left to say, no apologies to mend what had been broken between them. The inevitability of his demise remained.

The werewolf lowered its massive head, its snout inches from Conor's face as it licked his cheek with a grotesque mixture of saliva and blood, showing his father there was still empathy for him—*I'm sorry you failed*. Conor could taste his own tears mingling with the creature's foul breath, a bitter reminder of the love and loss that had brought them to this moment.

Margery Garrett, Flanagan's next door neighbor, was rolling her trash out to the end of the driveway when she noticed a peculiar sight. Shadows danced ominously in front of the Flanagan's window, a stark contrast to the usual tumult which echoed from within Conor's house. Margery, ever the nosy neighbor, approached cautiously, keeping her distance but straining to see what was unfolding inside.

As she peered through the window, horror seized her heart. Conor Flanagan's contorted body pressed against the glass, his screams echoing through the stillness of the evening. With a sickening lurch, Margery watched as it's claws tore open his rib cage, crimson spattering against the windowpane in a grotesque display of violence.

Frozen in terror, Margery could only watch helplessly as Conor's body was ripped apart by some unseen force, his organs sliding down the glass of the front window, spilling onto the floor as the creature within him feasted on his flesh. The sight was too much to bear, and with a strangled cry, Margery turned and fled, her mind reeling with shock and disbelief.

Racing back to her own home, Margery frantically screamed for her husband to call the police, her voice carrying through the night air like a banshee's wail. "Something's killing him! A large beast, like a big dog!" she shouted, her words ringing out in desperation as she sought help from anyone who would listen.

Meanwhile, the werewolf within the Flanagan's house heard Margery's cries and sensed danger approaching. With a final, savage snarl, it cast aside Conor's mangled body and crashed through the shattered window, disappearing into the darkness of the wilderness, leaving behind a scene of unimaginable gore for those who dared to witness it.

*You must be elusive.*

*You must not be greedy and feed when you like.*

*You need little to be known about us.*

Ryan Hatcher stood by the living room windows, transfixed by the chaotic scene unfolding outside. The piercing red and blue lights of the police cars illuminated the darkness, casting eerie shadows across the neighborhood. Ryan didn't need confirmation from anyone; he could already sense the weight of the unfolding tragedy.

Someone died tonight, and Ryan couldn't shake the feeling this was just the beginning. As he watched the police cars combing the area with their searchlights, a sense of dread settled over him like a suffocating blanket.

Eric Flanagan had murdered his father, that much was clear. The lone witness would recount a horrifying tale of a large animal attacking Conor, but Ryan knew the truth was far more sinister. No investigator would believe an animal could inflict such deliberate, calculated violence, tearing open a human rib cage with such precision.

As the reality of what had transpired sank in, Ryan couldn't help but feel a chill run down his spine. This was the moment when Eric crossed the point of no return, descending into darkness with no remorse for the carnage he had wrought. And Ryan feared they were all just pawns in a much larger, more malevolent game.



# CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

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# ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

Turkey farmer Gary Jersyk sat in his lime-green Barcalounger, a piece of furniture his wife, Betty, had found somewhere and insisted on keeping for its comfort despite its garish appearance. The fireplace crackled, providing warmth without the need for excessive electricity. Gary was on a mission to minimize their power bill, routinely turning off lights and unplugging appliances to save energy. But with winter looming, their efforts would soon be tested.

Fresh from a successful Thanksgiving season, they had been selling top quality turkeys to eager customers seeking a superior bird compared to those in supermarkets. Word of mouth had boosted their business, ensuring a steady flow of customers. With Christmas on the horizon, they anticipated even greater profits. Yet, the scent of turkey manure still permeated their farm, a reminder that success didn't erase all challenges.

Betty entered the living room with decaf coffee and a slice of pecan pie, a small gesture of comfort for her hardworking husband. They settled onto their velour couch, adorned with autumnal patterns, and enjoyed a moment of respite by the fire.

As they began to doze off to the crackling flames, the tranquil atmosphere was shattered by the sound of agitated animals outside. Bleating sheep and whinnying horses stirred Gary from his drowsiness. Sensing his unease, Betty asked, "What's happening, pa?"

"Just something spookin' the animals. Nothing to worry about, probably," Gary reassured her, though the sudden clamor from their typically calm horses gave him pause. Grabbing a flashlight, he rose from his seat, silently signaling to Betty he would investigate. She couldn't understand why men thought such gestures were comforting; to her, they only heightened anxiety.

The screen door burst open, slamming against the house with a deafening creak, a warning to any intruders daring to set foot on old man Jersyk's land. He had become a legendary figure in western Akron, shrouded in tales of violence and retribution. Some whispered he had killed a man in his barn for seeking shelter on a cold winter's night, while others

spun yarns of him driving vandals into the woods, where a savage bear awaited them in a hidden cave.

But the truth was far less sinister.

The Jersyks were simply an elderly couple seeking solitude, living off the grid in the remote reaches of Nowhere, Ohio. Gary Jersyk, clad in his red and black flannel hunting jacket, cast his flashlight beam towards the chicken coop, the light casting eerie shadows against the coop's weathered wood. He brushed a hand across his nose, his breath visible in the chilly night air, and surveyed the scene. Aside from a scattering of feathers, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

The turkeys at the back of the house were unusually agitated, their frantic gobbling cutting through the howling wind. Gary frowned, a sense of unease creeping over him. Turkeys were typically most active in the afternoons, leaving him to suspect *fowl play*—he loved that joke. However he couldn't shake the nervous humor of his own suspicion.

Gary rounded the corner, his flashlight beam cutting through the darkness as he aimed it towards the extensive fencing enclosing the turkeys. With a casual stride, he approached the gate, his demeanor unaffected by any potential intruders. He had long grown accustomed to the rumors surrounding him, choosing to embrace the false reputation rather than be offended by it. As he swung the gate open, he swept the beam of light around the pen, scanning for any signs of disturbance.

Taking careful steps, mindful of the turkey droppings coating his boots, Gary watched as his birds parted, creating a clear path for him. But amidst the scattered fowl, something caught his eye — three turkeys lying motionless in the muck. As he squinted, trying to discern the cause of their distress, a menacing figure emerged from the shadows. The flashlight revealed a pair of piercing green eyes, framed by sleek black fur with hints of grey and white.

Instinctively, Gary turned to retrieve his gun, his movements deliberate but swift. From the bedroom window, Betty observed her husband's actions with growing concern. "Why are you moving so slowly?" she called out, her voice cutting through the night air. Ignoring her, Gary quickened his pace, hoping to avoid provoking the creature lurking in the pen.

But Betty's persistent questioning only served to escalate the situation. "Why aren't you talking?" she pressed, her voice rising in volume. Frustrated, Gary shot her a glance and muttered, "Betty! Shut the hell up!."



As Gary hastened his steps, the squelching sound of the creature's approach grew louder. Sensing the impending danger, Betty leaned out of the window, her gaze fixed on the looming threat. With a gasp, she warned her husband of the danger lurking nearby.

Responding to her cries, Gary's pace quickened, his heart pounding in his chest. But before he could reach safety, the beast lunged forward, sinking its teeth into his arm with a vicious snarl. With a sickening thud, Gary was thrown into the air, his body careening towards the huddled turkeys. Betty watched in horror as the scene unfolded, her screams echoing through the night as her husband's severed arm fell onto the ground in front of her, creating a bloody puddle.

With his face buried in turkey excrement, Gary desperately lifted his head, calling out for his wife's help. But the wolf had other plans. With deliberate steps, it waded through the muck and forced Gary's head back down, its paw exerting pressure on his skull. As Gary gasped for air, suffocating under the weight of the waste, the werewolf began to tear at his clothes with its teeth, hungrily devouring the flesh from his back and love handles.

Betty stood frozen, paralyzed by the gruesome scene unfolding before her eyes. She watched helplessly as her husband was consumed by the savage creature, unable to comprehend the horror of the moment. Eventually, she snapped out of her trance and reached for the olive green rotary phone beside their bed, her trembling fingers dialing the emergency number.

Through tears and frantic gasps, Betty pleaded for help, describing the terrifying ordeal unfolding in their backyard. As the dispatcher instructed her to stay on the line, Betty glanced out of the window, her heart pounding in her chest as she searched for any sign of the beast.

When the authorities arrived, they found Gary's lifeless body lying face down in the filth, his head buried beneath the waste. His spine protruded grotesquely through his back, loose and chewed, evidence of the brutal attack he had endured. Though he had long since succumbed to asphyxiation, the sight was no less harrowing.

In the end, Betty could only offer a silent prayer of gratitude for the small mercy her husband had been spared from the agony of feeling his flesh and bones being torn from his body.



# CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

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# THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

Ryan opened his front door at eleven in the morning to find his trio of friends standing there, their expressions a mix of concern and anticipation. It was evident they had something urgent to share. As they stepped inside, Ryan braced himself for the news.

“Did you hear? They found Mr. Flanagan in his home...,” Scott began, his voice trailing off as he glanced at Ryan, expecting a reaction.

Ryan nodded solemnly, already aware of the grim details. The recent spate of attacks had sent shockwaves through their community, leaving everyone on edge. The discovery of another victim only added to the growing sense of unease.

Listening to his friends recount the latest developments, Ryan remained outwardly composed, though inwardly he felt a sense of dread creeping over him. He cast a subtle glance around the room, half expecting to see the spectral figures haunting him in recent weeks. To his relief, there were none.

While Scott, Christina, and Colin continued discussing the recent tragedies, Ryan's mind drifted. He couldn't shake the feeling of emptiness gnawing at him, a silent reminder of the lives lost to the relentless violence.

Finally, the conversation lulled, and Ryan seized the opportunity to escape the suffocating atmosphere indoors. He made his way to the garage, the familiar surroundings offering a fleeting sense of solace.

His friends followed suit, their voices gradually fading into the background as Ryan sifted through his father's belongings, searching for a distraction from the grim reality outside. Colin's discovery of a few baseball gloves and a ball sparked an unexpected suggestion.

“Can we play catch?” Colin asked, his excitement palpable.

Scott seemed puzzled by the request, but Colin's explanation softened the mood. Sensing Ryan's tacit approval, Christina looked to him for confirmation.

Surprised by the suggestion but eager for any diversion, Ryan nodded. “You know what? I think it sounds like a good idea right now.”

With a newfound sense of purpose, the four friends made their way to the front yard, where the towering blue spruce stood sentinel. As they began to play catch, the weight of the recent tragedies momentarily lifted, replaced by a fleeting sense of normalcy.

Devin lingered in his room, experimenting with various outfits and assessing himself in the mirror, cursing lanky body. He was determined to choose the perfect attire for his upcoming visit to Valerie's house later in the evening. The strained dynamic between their families weighed heavily on him, especially knowing Valerie's father held animosity toward his own family since their father's falling out. Although there had been a tentative reconciliation during Halloween, Devin remained skeptical about the lasting impact.

Despite these family tensions, Devin couldn't shake his concern for Valerie's well-being. He had noticed signs of potential abuse within the Donovan household, even though Valerie and Scott remained tight-lipped about the matter. Despite his misgivings, Devin felt compelled to ensure Valerie was safe, regardless of the strained relationship between their families.

He hadn't yet heard about the attacks from the previous night, but his thoughts were consumed by concern for his friend, Eric. Despite disapproving of Eric's behavior on Saturday night, he couldn't shake the worry for his friend's interests. Despite Eric's often abrasive demeanor, he had been Devin's friend for a significant period, and Devin wasn't ready to give up on him just yet. Now he decided to focus on preparing himself to speak with Valerie, attempting to mask the nervousness lingering beneath the surface.

The corpse of a high school student stared back at Eric Flanagan when he opened his eyes. The boy looked familiar to him as he quickly sat up, scared, not knowing where he was or why. He looked around and found he sat in a wheat field near the main highway, naked, cold, and scared. His immediate response was to cover himself with his hands. Eric looked at the teenager again, whose eyes and mouth were open. Dried blood ran down the dead boy's face as flies buzzed around him.

They both lay on a blanket, one nude and the other with most of their clothes off. Eric was confused as to what had happened with the young man. Eric wondered if he had a homosexual experience he had no memory of. He looked to his other side, popping his spine, and found an almost

naked girl with brown hair, a purple sweater, and no bottoms. The girl also seemed extremely familiar, she had her throat ripped out and part of her left breast and side eaten down to her ribs—dead lovers in a field, murdered by Eric. It attacked them while consummating their relationship, tearing their clothes and flesh apart. Their dead glares looked towards Eric and his nakedness as if wondering why they had to die.

He began to think about what he did to his classmates, Ben and Julie. Eric knew they looked familiar, and as he realized who they were, he became more nauseous. He imagined consuming, chewing in their bodies, not knowing if it were real or just his imagination. When Eric tried to remember, he imagined murdering them in his human body. His thoughts lingered on, acting like a cannibal, moaning in delight as their skin loosely flapped between his teeth whenever his tongue glided against them. Eric began to wretch, thinking about what he had done to those poor people. This wasn't what he wanted.

*You have done what was necessary.*

*You are whole, strong, and able.*

Eric paused, his gaze fixated on the ground as he collected himself. The voice hadn't led him astray, and its presence wasn't as unsettling as he had initially feared. Coming to terms with his transformation was a daunting task in itself. He had to confront the reality that was now something different, and his lupine instincts offered him a new path—an existence filled with purpose, resolve, and self-assurance. It was a chance to rise above the mediocrity of his surroundings, an opportunity to escape this wretched town.

Amidst the swaying wheat, Eric turned his attention to the sun, struggling to penetrate the thick veil of dark clouds overhead. The scent of impending snow lingered in the air, prompting him to escape from the lifeless bodies of the young lovers. An inexplicable certainty enveloped him: his father was no more, the memory of their altercation the last clear recollection before his awakening. Retrieving the blood-soaked clothing belonging to Ben, a fellow student from Norton High School, fragments of the previous night's events flooded his mind.

Inspecting the garments, Eric deemed the long sleeved shirt beyond salvaging, but the pants and undershirt appeared relatively intact. He pulled them on, the jeans slightly loose but manageable, thanks to the belt adorning Ben's waist—a small stroke of luck amidst the chaos.

Laying low, Eric contemplated his father's abusive behavior and the torment he endured growing up under his roof. They say you can never go home, and for him, that was true. However, he could seek solace elsewhere, knowing others shared his plight—people who, like him, had never truly experienced the warmth of a loving home. If there was any silver lining to his monthly Lycan revolution, it was his ability to confront the abusers terrorizing those too afraid to stand up for themselves. He made it his mission to protect the women and children trapped in the clutches of abusive, unemployed blue-collar workers, a dime a dozen in Akron.

He dashed through the field and into the woods, his purpose clear in his mind, eagerly awaiting the onset of nightfall. He knew where he would go next, somewhere close to home. But in his fervent quest to be a savior, Eric had overlooked the consequences of his actions and his inability to rein in his impulses. Everyone yearns to be a hero, yet few acknowledge the harm good intentions can inadvertently cause.

"I think we need to address the elephant in the room," Christina began as the four friends tossed a tennis ball around in the Hatcher's yard, next to the giant spruce tree. Not knowing what the term meant, Colin looked around for a pachyderm before a light went off in his head, understanding the metaphor when Scott replied, "Oh, please. Sorry, bud, but I'm still not buying your werewolf theory has any legs."

"You can't, or you won't?" Ryan deadpanned. He knew he was onto something and grew tired of the coincidences in front of everyone's faces, only for them not to acknowledge them. "I mean, without shooting one, how can you prove it's a human without seeing someone change in front of you?" Ryan caught the baseball Scott threw to him and pondered the question—you *can't*, *I suppose*. What do you think you would do if one changed in front of you?" Colin asked.

Scott answered honestly, "I'd probably run towards the fuckin' hills!" They all, including a melancholy Ryan, laughed at the delivery of his answer.

"Hey! Knob gobbler!" a voice from above called out to Ryan. He lifted his head towards the living room window, where Devin shouted. He looked up at his brother, who chuckled because Ryan responded to his insulting name, then asked, "Have you seen my blue button-up?" Ryan threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to put up with any of his brother's crap. "Well?"

"Oh! Um...I don't care...(whisper) fuckin' dickhead," Ryan hissed.

"I heard that," Devin said before he closed the window.

He turned and looked at Scott, who had a goofy grin with his arms out, delighted his friend was beginning to stand up for himself. "I'm so proud of my little boy! His balls have gotten bigger and hopefully dropped." Before taking one step forward, Scott's body fell onto the ground from an unseen force behind him. An unseen force in front of the spruce where they had congregated pushed him to the ground. He tripped over his own feet, and his body landed face first in front of Colin. The standing three all looked at one another, holding in laughter.

Their tree had been part of too many supernatural happenings for Ryan not to notice: The corpse of the jogger repeating the same movements, the picture Layla had created with her Lite Brite set, Layla mimicking the ghost's motions. Unbeknownst to him, his mother had also been pushed by something in the same spot. There were too many coincidences. Ryan thought about the man in the black jogging attire, his movements, and how, in the end, he put his arms out as if he were blocking his attacker. "Did you see that?" Scott asked, pulling dried leaf fragments from his mouth and lips. They didn't, but he believed and decided to experiment further.

Before he knew it, Colin was standing in front of the tree with an old football helmet and pillows tied around his torso to lessen the impact if he were to fall forward. The rest stood back, waiting and timing the phenomena. "What am I supposed to do?" Colin nervously asked.

"Nothing. Just stand there and tell me if you feel anything," Ryan instructed. They all waited in anticipation for their friend to fall forwards. After a few minutes, Scott sighed, "I don't think it's going to happen again. Maybe it was just some weird thing...like the Bermuda Triangle." Just as he ended his thought, Colin fell forward, landing hard on the ground but unscathed thanks to the helmet and pillows taking the brunt of the fall. "I felt something," Colin gasped, looking at the dying grass from inside the helmet.

They all ran to Colin to lift him and dust off the pillows and the back of his clothes. "That was weird," Christina said, stating the obvious. Colin bent over to dust his jeans off when he noticed Ryan walking from the rest of them. Concerned, he decided to follow his first real friend to see where he was going, hoping he would be fine.

*I'm not fine. I am so tired of this secret bullshit,* Ryan thought.



In just one month, Ryan felt as though he had mentally aged five years. No one understood him like they once did. Once the quiet one of the group, he had become brooding, outspoken, and for the first time, surer of himself than ever before, even if the company he kept wasn't. Ryan was determined to find something to prove he, at least, could be justified in his thoughts.

"Where are you going?" Christina yelled. Ryan owed her, them, an answer. He had debated bringing it up again for days, fearing the possibility of losing his friends. But then a realization struck him: *I don't owe them anything! I am the one dealing with this shit, not them!* He had become conceited. He made his resolve a crusade to prove he was right, forgetting his concern for others and how much danger they could be in. Ryan stomped through the garage toward his father's workbench which, under normal circumstances, would be a place no one was ever allowed to be near.

Ryan's father was obsessive-compulsive regarding his tools, parts, and bench. Every jar had a different type of nut or bolt. Wrenches, pliers, and screwdrivers were placed gingerly by size and type in his red Craftsman toolbox drawers. Under the bench were milk crates full of books and magazines he would buy from the hardware store, ordered by issue and release date. With all the tools and self-help books in the garage, if Ryan had a dollar for every time his dad built something, he would probably have a buck. He knew nothing substantial would probably be in the drawers of his toolboxes because his dad was afraid of messing them up himself.

Scott observed his friend angrily rummaging through the crates full of books and magazines. It didn't take long for Ryan to spot something of interest. He reached into a red box and pulled out old out of place book among the rest of the handyman's reading materials. *Nothing there!*

To everyone's surprise, Ryan unearthed a grey plastic bin filled with nothing but toys from his childhood days with Devin. Sitting down on the cold concrete, he carefully examined each item, reminiscing about the memories they held. As he picked up each toy, memories flooded back, from playing with plastic spaceships to action figures ranging from Masters of the Universe to the Captain Power ship and video cassettes. He recalled battling imaginary foes on screen with the white ship firing infrared light, and the thrill of the cockpit deploying in response to the show's action.

As Ryan and his curious friends delved into his childhood treasures, the anger and confusion began to dissipate. While Colin examined the toys, Scott reminisced about playing with them in the past. Memories resurfaced,

both old and new, like finding a portable Pac-Man arcade cabinet with the blue ghost illustrated on a yellow and black sticker. As Christina shared stories of playing dolls with Ryan when no one else was around, Ryan watched Colin playing with the toys, feeling a pang of jealousy and possessiveness.

In a moment of impulsivity, Ryan reached out to grab the toy from Colin. Colin flinched and pulled the toy back, puzzled by Ryan's sudden action. Gradually, Ryan withdrew his arm, realizing these toys were no longer his to claim. They remained in his possession, but he had outgrown them, moving on from the world of make believe long ago. Time had a way of making people forget the things which once shaped them, but the memories and sentiments always had a way of resurfacing.

Though his toys held sentimental value, Ryan recognized they no longer belonged to him in the same way. They needed to find new owners who could appreciate them, if only for a little while longer.

*It's just hard to let go.*

Ryan sank down, feeling ashamed of his selfish impulse to snatch away the toy. He realized Colin, being younger, might not have had the chance to play with such toys before. However, Colin didn't seem unwilling to return the game. "Do you mind if I play with this?" he asked tentatively. Ryan shook his head lightly, saying, "It needs batteries, but you can take it home and play with it. Just... um... just let me have a turn when I come over to your place, okay?" Colin agreed, his eyes fixed on the small arcade game. Now, he could relive the arcade experience in his own way, thrilled at the thought, uncertain if he'd ever get to go back.

Meanwhile, unnoticed by the others, Christina stood and began browsing the shelves near the workbench. She selected a peculiar book from the shelf, its appearance not quite matching the others. Quickly flipping through the pages, she examined the front cover, then the back, and back to the front again, her expression one of disbelief, torn over whether to speak up.

He sensed Christina's unease, rose to his feet, setting down the Ghostbusters Ecto-1 plastic car he had been holding. "What's wrong?" he asked. She glanced over at him, taking a deep breath before walking over with the book. Uncertain of what he would find, Ryan scanned the cover, reading the title, "Paranormal Origins: A Guide to Understanding the Unexplainable."

As Ryan began to flip through the pages, discussing poltergeists, spirits, possessions, vampires, and the historical impact of these phenomena, his friends watched, intrigued. Ryan paused at a folded page, skipping over the introductory section to the marked area. Drawings of werewolves and humans filled the pages, depicting what the author envisioned they would look like if they were real. When he turned to the next page, he saw an illustration of a humanoid figure with a wolf's head and elongated limbs covered in fur. Reading the accompanying text, Ryan learned about the Lycanthrope or Wolfwalkers and their origins during the medieval period.

Christina read over his shoulder, getting through the first paragraph before Ryan abruptly slammed the book shut. He had seen enough. The fact his father kept a book like this in the garage, nestled among others, and had marked a chapter about Lycan lore, was enough to unsettle him.

He tossed the book to Scott, who fumbled to catch it. Opening to where the corner of a page was folded, Scott began to read, with Colin pressing his face against Scott's shoulder to follow along. Meanwhile, Ryan stepped outside to inhale the cool fall air, with Christina trailing behind. She was at a loss for words. Christina didn't want to entertain the idea, but the events of the previous night, the full moon, and the convenient absence of Ryan's parents made it hard to ignore.

"It's not just a possibility anymore," Ryan declared, almost as if he had read Christina's thoughts. "Halloween. Eric Flanagan is missing. There were about four killings last night. When there was just one a month ago, there were maybe a couple each night."

Listening to Ryan, Scott felt a pang of regret for not taking his friend's fears more seriously. As he opened the front of the book and examined the back cover, his eyes widened in disbelief, realizing the rabbit hole went even deeper.

"You won't believe this," Scott said, approaching Ryan and tapping the inside of the cover. Taking the book from his friend's hands, he pointed to a signature in the upper right corner: M. Craggs.

Ryan glanced at his neighbor's house, the book confirming what he had already suspected. The adults involved on Halloween night—Ryan's parents, Scott's folks, and Melvin Craggs—all participated in burying the body of the man they had killed when he transformed into a werewolf. They had to keep it a secret; anyone harmed by it could inherit the curse.

"Ryan," Scott began solemnly, catching his friend's attention, "I don't think there's any way to doubt it anymore. Your neighbor gave your dad this book just in case he was going to turn." Christina recalled Devin mentioning their neighbors extensive collection of literature, saying, "He had so many magazines and books. Owning this wouldn't be unusual."

"Do you think your parents know about him—the marks on his body from that night?" Ryan asked, glancing back at Colin, who was still seated in the garage, listening intently.

"They've been acting weird. I mean...they're always weird, though. But if they are covering up a murder, then it makes sense, I s'pose," Scott answered.

"Is it murder?" Christina asked. "I mean, if the man was attacking, it's more like self-defense, right?"

"But he wasn't human when the attack started. He was a werewolf," Scott interjected.

"So what? What difference does that make?"

"It makes all the difference," Ryan interrupted their potential debate. "How would they explain why they shot a naked man in the face? Because he was a monster? I hate that they buried the body and covered it up, but at the same time, I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing." Ryan huffed, watching his cold breath leave his mouth. "They did what they had to do."

"Only...the police probably think it's the same animal because they never found the body. Because it was human," Christina thought out loud. Ryan and Scott nodded as they walked into the garage from the cold. "There isn't just one anymore," Ryan pointed out again. "There are probably at least two, and the suspects are the same: My dad, Scott's sister—Valerie, and Eric Flanagan, which I think at this point is the most obvious."

"How do we know the last wolf didn't scratch someone else? Like on the other nights?" Christina logically asked.

"We don't," Ryan shrugged. "But this book my dad borrowed, or old man Craggs gave to him makes me think my dad is in danger. No. Anyone near him will be in trouble. But you're right. Maybe there are others out there."

Scott became concerningly thrilled over the possibility of monsters in Norton. "This is the most exciting thing this town will ever be a part of, and we're in the middle of it!" Colin stood up, angry at Scott for saying such

things. "People are dead, and Ryan's dad might be part of it. Maybe it shouldn't be something to get excited about!" Scott shamefully looked down at his feet, forgetting people he knew were involved. "Sorry," he told everyone.

"It's fine. You get excited. I get it," Ryan reassured him before thinking of the obvious question, "Did you see your sister this morning?"

Scott thought about it for a moment before answering, "No. I walked by Valerie's room, and her bed wasn't made, which she usually does. I figured she just went out early this morning. Come to think of it, I thought she might have been here with your brother since they are kind of seeing each other."

Ryan shook his head, replying, "I haven't seen her at all today." Scott looked around at everyone else as they shook their heads. He was now becoming concerned no one had seen or heard anything from her.

He glanced over at Scott, his curiosity piqued by the gear he had glimpsed in the garage a few days ago. It was evident Scott's father possessed some intriguing equipment Ryan had never been aware of, prompting him to inquire further. "What else does your dad have hiding in your garage, and do you think he'd mind if I borrowed it? It might just come in handy, possibly even save a life or two."

"Okay, butt nugget," Devin interrupted as he walked into the garage, indicating he was about to leave for Donovan's house for dinner and then to the festival. Ryan found it peculiar that while school was canceled because of animal attacks, the festival proceeded as scheduled for public amusement. *Maybe they figured it wouldn't be an issue with so many people in one place.* "I'm going to your house," Devin told Scott.

"Can you give us all a ride?" Ryan asked, wanting to dig around in Donovan's garage for supplies. Devin shook his head and replied, "Nope. I'm taking Cragg's motorcycle over." His brother's cocky attitude displeased Ryan. Pitching the book of paranormal entities at his brother, Ryan hissed, "Give this back to Melvin while you're at it." Devin looked at the cover and asked, "What is this?"

"Someone borrowed a book. I'm giving it back. He'll know what it is, and you can tell him I found it for him. He's welcome," Ryan answered with contempt. Scott punched Ryan in the arm and told him, "Come on. We'll just walk there."

"Can't. Have to look after Layloo."

"I'll stay!" Christina volunteered.

Ryan smiled at his girlfriend and mouthed, "Thank you." The boys gathered around and began to make their way to Scott's house, hoping they would beat Devin to it. Surprisingly, they did and started going through all the boxes, trying to remain quiet to not alert Rick. He was probably a few bottles in already. They found the walkie-talkies, handcuffs, duct tape, a crossbow with arrows, and a functioning taser between the three of them. After making a giant pile on the floor of Scott's garage, Ryan looked at his comrades, who now had red bandanas on, including himself, and declared, "I need to borrow these."

"Why all of them?" Colin asked. Ryan gave him the side-eye and dramatically answered, "Because you never know."

Devin rode up on the black motorcycle. Scott realized he had still not seen his sister yet and wondered if she was even home. "How'd you all get here so fast?" Devin asked. Ryan looked at his friends and lied, telling him they ran. Colin rode his bike slowly as Ryan and Scott walked. Devin had just taken his sweet time.

"Wait. Who is looking after Layla?"

"Christina is."

"Don't make your poor girlfriend suffer. She's probably making her play dolls or something," Devin scoffed.

"Well, you see, my girlfriend is cool," Ryan responded with a grin. Devin shook his head, "Whatever; just get home." Ryan agreed and began putting the supplies Scott and Colin helped him collect.

Valerie walked out of the door to the garage connected to the kitchen, greeting Devin. Scott sighed in relief, knowing his sister was fine. Ryan was glad his friend felt better, but it didn't mean she didn't turn the night before.

With an entire cardboard box in his hands full, Ryan looked at Colin, who was mounting his newish bike, and Scott and Valerie and his brother. They were all going to the Winter Festival, and felt compelled to tell all of them, "Please be careful tonight. I want to be wrong, but maybe I'm not." His friends nodded, and Devin stared at him blankly, wondering if werewolves were the worst thing in this town. Valerie had no doubt begun acting weird. Devin never thought much of her becoming possessed or having a curse, not realizing her strange moods worsened the closer it came to a full moon.

Ryan walked with items that could be beneficial tomorrow night. He just hoped there wouldn't be a need for them after all. Christina met him in his garage, looking at all the weapons and items used to bind someone, wondering what her boyfriend had in mind. Ryan knew the look all too well and, without her asking, told her, "Just in case."

She nodded and told him his little sister was asleep, taking a nap. Ryan thanked Christina, kissing her goodbye. Before she made her way to the driveway, Christina turned around, compelled to ask, "Are you okay?" Ryan smiled, answering, "Don't know, but please be careful tonight. If you haven't heard already, we might have werewolves."

"I hope not," she nervously laughed as she began to walk home, where she would start getting ready for the festival in the middle of town. Ryan watched her walk down the street towards her home, praying to whatever god would listen to make everything he thought come about tonight not happen.





# CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

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# MANIAC

Ryan felt like everything from here on in was beyond his control. Lying on the blue couch, staring at the ceiling, he went over all the events, the different theories, and what the ghosts were trying to show him using Layla as a conduit through Lite-Brite pictures made of holes. Not having any control of his circumstances made Ryan anxious, even irritable. It seemed fate had something to say about it. There was nothing he could do now but sit back and wait, wondering what the outcome of tonight would be. He never understood what the term ‘too close to home’ meant when he was innocent, hiding from the horrors of the outside world in his little, relatively safe town. Now, the terror was lurking in his neighborhood, or worse, in his own house.

His sister remained quiet, playing in her room while listening to the radio. Ryan assumed she was playing with her dolls until he saw scattered circles of colored light on the wall nearest the stairs. *Layla is making another picture.* Ryan was not interested in what she was creating now. He had seen all that needed to be seen, and nothing new would come of it.

The house was quiet—how Ryan would generally prefer it. But tonight, he needed more distraction from his thoughts than ever before. He could have gone downstairs to view one of his movies on VHS Calvin had recorded on the television. But he didn’t. He needed to be attentive and would have felt horrible if he hadn’t prepared for the worst. Becoming comfortable watching *The Wrath of Khan* was not an option.

*No. I have to be ready.*

Rick kept giving Devin the ‘ol stink eye whenever he talked, laughed, or made any sound. At one point, Devin turned his body on the brown leather couch in their living room, creating a flatulent sound everyone found humorous, especially Scott. After Devin swore it didn’t come from his rear, Rick looked at him as if someone had run their fingernails across a chalkboard. The thought of his daughter seeing a Hatcher was strange. Rick wanted to hate Calvin and his family. He knew there was no justifiable reason, with only jealousy to blame but sided with contempt instead.

The Donovans didn't have much money because of Rick's layoff. However, they managed to set some back for the rides at the festival later. Silvia decided it was best if everyone stayed in for dinner, so she made her famous tacos. Silvia Donovan brought a crockpot of seasoned hamburger meat and large tortilla shells whenever there was some community event in the past. It was cheaper than the hard shells, and the residents of all three townships scarfed them down every time, leaving no leftovers. No one could ever figure out what made them so good, and Silvia would never tell.

After dinner, Rick decided to go easy on Devin. Usually, he would drill a boy with questions just to get them frazzled. To be fair, Devin was a much better choice than Eric Flanagan when he put it into perspective, so he went easy on him.

They all sat and ate as the kids talked about music and movies, everything releasing soon, like the new Batman movie the upcoming summer. Silvia and Rick just sat and listened to their kids talk about things passionately, something they hadn't heard in years. The kids remained in their rooms or went out most of the time—they were getting to know their kids again. Rick was confident it was mainly his fault for pushing them away. He had become busy feeling sorry for himself and being abusive to others. He had forgotten to be a dad again, letting the beer and the occasional prescription drug make him believe nothing gets the best of him. Unfortunately, Rick's damage had taken its toll, and everyone knew it. They all sat together and enjoyed each other's company for once with Devin and Rick thinking, *this is nice*.

The doorbell echoed through the house.

Everyone glanced at one another, wondering if someone else was dropping by they forgot about. Taking the initiative, Scott hopped from his seat and walked to the front door. He noticed it was only five in the evening, already becoming dark outside as he opened it. A man with his back turned stood, leaning on the brick exterior of the house. Scott looked him up and down only to find one recognizable trait of someone he knew—the red hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Eric Flanagan turned around, smiling at Scott. Scared, Scott began to stutter his words, "Wha...what do you...you need?" Eric heard the elevated beats of Scott's heart, now knowing he had frightened him. "Hey there, champ," Eric said with a sly grin. "Folks around?" Scott frowned, leering at Eric, informing him, "We're eating."

Scott watched Eric's nose hover towards the front door, nostrils flaring, taking in the aroma of the dinner inside. "Mmmm. That smells good. Mind if I talk to the family? It's just been too long! Know what I mean?" Eric elated disingenuously, ready to push himself through the door. Instead, Scott started to slam the door in his face until Eric caught it with his hand, forcing it open.

With his head down, Eric looked up at Scott with sinister intent. His eyes had a dark yellow tint, bouncing around, side to side, at the top of his sockets as he began to sweat profusely out in the cold. "Let me in, and you might live through this, big boy," Eric menacingly whispered to Scott. Terrified of the look in his eyes, Scott knew Ryan was right—Eric Flanagan was turning into a werewolf.

"Who is it?" Silvia asked, wondering what was happening at her front door. Scott turned his head towards her, nervous to talk, knowing something terrible was about to happen.

"Just me, Sil," Eric smiled as he pushed through the doorway. *Sil? He never called her that*, Scott thought. "I could smell those famous tacos of yours from outside. Are they delicious? Mmmm. I bet they are! Are they, Scott?" Shifting his eyes between his mother and Eric, Scott finally nodded his head.

Valerie stood from the table, scared for her family. She had heard how they found Eric's father in their house with his insides torn out. "Val...you look great!" Eric grinned, wiping the sweat from his brow. *He is too happy*, Scott thought, noting the sudden change in his demeanor. *He is too happy for a guy whose dad died. Maybe he is crazy*. "You shouldn't be here," she told him, feeling weak in the legs. "The cops are looking for you. They want to know what happened to your dad."

Eric shrugged, "Don't know." He bit his bottom lip and glanced at everyone at the dinner table. "But let's be honest, though. Do you really give that much of a shit?"

His human mind fell into the background of his new persona, but he could see through the amber eyes of his wolf body, doing nothing to stop it. The uneasy Donovans continued to sit around the table, fearing to move, except Scott, who lingered near the front door in case things were to get a little hairy. Scott eyed the poker sitting in a gold canister near their fireplace, knowing it would be the only weapon anyone could reach for.

“Would you like some tacos?” Silvia nervously asked him as a plate shook in her hands.

“No thanks. Don’t have the appetite for tacos right now, but I’ll tell ya, you could make a killin’ selling ‘em. I don’t know if anyone ever told you that before, but they are to die for!” Eric proclaimed as he stood up straight, popping his back. “Hey, man!” Eric shouted to Devin. “It’s been a bit, hasn’t it?” Unamused by his fake cordialness, Devin nodded, “Where you been?”

“Out and about. You know me.”

“Yeah, I do, and 'out and about' isn’t something you do. Where you been?”

Eric breathed in, annoyed. “I’ve been getting by.”

Rick, primarily silent, stood from his seat and ordered Eric, “Get out of my house! I never liked you. You’re nothin’ but a punk ass nuisance in this town, and everyone knows it, even your dad!” Scott inched closer to the door, mumbling, “Oh, shit,” under his breath. Eric’s fake smile turned into a frown as he sucked his teeth, readying to clash. “Oh, I bet he did. It seems like you two have a lot in common—dolin’ out the discipline, right?” Rick turned to look at his daughter, knowing what Eric was insinuating. “The fuck is he on about?”

“Hey, Devin! Did you know my old man loved beating the shit out of me? Berating me? Putting out lit cigars and cigarettes on me?” Eric asked intensely, genuinely wanting to know the answer. Devin shook his head. He never knew what his home life was like. Eric never invited anyone over because he was embarrassed by his dad with good reason. “Yeah. Whenever I went to school with a shiner, it wasn’t because I got into a fight with some punks, like I told you. It was because of that fuckin’ asshole!”

Devin, taken aback by Eric’s confession, became distraught and confused. “Why didn’t you say anything?” Eric wiped the sweat from his face again and pulled at his shirt collar, burning up—his human side was coming through to explain himself, pushing the wolf back. “I don’t know. I was embarrassed—didn’t want to put my problems on you. I thought if you knew, you wouldn’t want to hang with me, ya know? I knew you wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that!” Devin explained, saddened by his friend, realizing he was a better person than he, or anyone else, gave him credit. Eric acted out, running his mouth off too much, sometimes too far. “You made that decision for me, man.”

Eric began to cry. “No one else ever talks about it! Why should I?” Rick watched as Eric began to twitch, hoping he wouldn’t tell everyone about his dirty little secret. “People just take it. This whole goddamn world is full of abusive assholes! You’re in a room with one right now. Ain’ that right, Mr. Donovan?”

Valerie looked over to her father and then to her mother, knowing the truth she kept to herself was about to be spoken. “I know you’ve seen it, man. The bruises she hides under makeup, hoping none of her hoity-toity friends realize she and her family are nothing but white trash. It’s all about appearances, ain’t it? I know you’ve seen it, Devin, or at least wondered about it even if you weren’t sure,” Eric hoarsely yelled before the beast’s gruffness came out.

Falling to his knees, Eric began to writhe in pain, panting. Rick thought it was the perfect time to retaliate. “You shut your face! You don’t know what the hell you’re talkin’ bout, boy!” Rick shouted, stomping towards him, ready to pull him by the shirt and throw him out.

Scott watched with his mouth hung open. He could only imagine what would happen to Eric Flanagan now, wondering if he would do what Ryan said he would—turn into a werewolf. Eric lifted his head back, jumping to his feet just as Rick threw his fist back to strike. Eric swiftly ran past Devin and punched Rick in the throat, causing him to fall onto the dinner table. He choked on his breath, pushing taco meat and shells onto the carpet as Silvia and Valerie scattered.

Placing his right hand over Rick’s throat, Eric picked him up with a strength he had forgotten he had now, moments before the full moon would appear in the sky. “Put him down!” Valerie screamed, not knowing what to do as her stomach began to turn. Silvia made her way over to Scott, ready to protect him at all costs.

“Get! Out!” Eric hissed as his voice croaked, turning into a howl. It glared at Rick. The wolf would take care of him, the abusive father who liked to hit his daughter. Hyperventilating, Rick watched as Eric grew, looming over him. His eyes were yellowing more as his pupils thinned.

Grabbing the poker as the rest ran out of the house to get help, Scott, with his morbid curiosity, stopped and watched Eric, hoping to see how he would turn. From extensive horror film viewings, he knew this would be the point when the audience would scream for him to run. Valerie reached inside through the front door threshold and took her brother by the arm,

pulling him outside. Silvia screamed for someone to call the police. Neighbors shifted their blinds, peeking through to view what was happening outside. Valerie ran to the side of the road, waving down anyone who could save dad. Several cars drove by, rubbernecking the scene, not wanting any part of violence happening mere feet away.

They were scared. Everyone was.

The sound of agony made everyone halt, including the neighbors who had walked outside. Devin couldn't make out if it were Eric or Rick, then a second human scream came from the house. "What the hell is happening to you?" they heard Rick shout from inside the house. Grunts from an animal were heard. Everyone looked at one another, wondering what was happening at the Donovan house.

The front door burst open. Everyone watched Rick emerge, demanding people to run from the monster inside. What followed would be seared into the residents of Holiday Heights' minds for the rest of their lives. A creature, with the head and torso of a massive dog foaming at the mouth, stalked out of the front door of the home, moving on its hind legs, emitting guttural growls. Men backed away as women covered their mouths, unable to comprehend what they were witnessing. Scott and Devin stood frozen in terror as Rick reached out desperately for help.

There was no denying it anymore—*Ryan Hatcher was right*—Eric Flanagan was a werewolf.

Eric had transformed into a werewolf this night and the previous one. No one wanted to think about the carnage he inflicted upon his father. If they had seen the brutality his son had unleashed upon Conor, they would have fled far from Rick Donovan's home.

Pushing himself far from the wolf who had taken over Eric Flanagan's body, Rick called out for his family to get help. The wolf bared its teeth, saliva dripping from its jaws as it licked his sweaty, salty skin, savoring the tears of its prey. It extended its elongated fingers, revealing its nails, poised to strike again.

Valerie moved towards the wolf and her father, unable to believe what she was witnessing. She had tried to block out the events from a month prior, hoping it had been a hallucination. As she examined Eric's Lycan body, she observed shades of red, reminiscent of his hair, highlighting his fur. Somewhere beneath the evil exterior was Eric. She believed there was a

way to reach him, but he seemed resigned to letting the wolf take control, unwilling to fight back.

Scott glanced at his sister, realizing she had not changed like Eric had, indicating she wasn't cursed, and the injuries Ryan had spoken about were caused by something else. It was a small relief amidst the chaos, but a relief, nonetheless.

The wolf raised its hand, preparing to rip flesh with its claws while Rick braced himself for the imminent attack. The massive pupils began to contract in the center of the yellow orbs, and Rick felt perhaps the wolf recognized him. It wasn't Eric attacking anymore. The wolf didn't care about Rick's past transgressions. All it cared about was its next meal. It gleamed at his family, considering its options, before Eric managed to momentarily restrain the wolf from within, unwilling to let it harm Valerie and Scott. All the animosity and resentment he had harbored from the abuse they had endured paled in comparison to the cruelty his father inflicted upon him over the years.

*You wanted this!*

*You want vengeance!*

*You cannot play vigilante and grow a pathetic human conscience!*

The wolf was right. Eric wanted this to be the outcome; it was all premeditated. He'd forgotten little could be done to stop the beast once it appeared and his friends were now in jeopardy because of him.

*You will leave my friends and their families alone!* Eric ordered his other self.

*No. I will not.*

The wolf thrust its saliva drenched claws into Rick Donovan's chest, unleashing a torrent of blood. It howled with savage delight, relishing the sight of his impending demise. Screams echoed from all around, from his family to the horrified neighbors witnessing the gruesome spectacle. Amidst the chaos, another voice rose above the cacophony, growing louder with each passing second.

"Get off my dad!"

Scott Donovan charged towards the creature, brandishing the fireplace poker like a weapon forged in fury. The iron hook at its end descended with the force of a vengeful god, tearing through fur and flesh as it struck the beast's back. A pained yelp erupted from the wolf's jaws as it recoiled, rising onto its hind legs in a display of massive strength. Scott clung to the



poker's grip, suspended in the air as gravity pulled them both towards the ground. The iron continued to rend through the wolf's hide, drawing crimson rivers from its flesh.

With a final, desperate effort, Scott released his grip on the poker, tumbling to the ground beside the wounded beast. He glanced over to his father, wracked with agony, mouthing the word, "Run," gratitude shining in his eyes for his son's valiant attempt to save him.

The wolf, now enraged and wounded, tore the weapon from its back with a feral snarl, fixing its predatory gaze upon Scott. "Oh, shit!" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet as terror coursed through his veins. With a primal instinct for survival, he fled from the vile beast, knowing his family's lives depended on his escape. The wolf, poised to give chase, hesitated as it realized that it was being watched—something no werewolf desires: an audience for their bloodlust.

*You have let too many people witness.*

*You must leave now.*

*We must leave now.*

The wolf crouched down on all fours, its menacing silhouette fading into the darkness as panicked bystanders scattered, fearing another brutal attack. Silvia rushed to her husband's side, frantically pressing her hand against his chest to stem the flow of blood. Meanwhile, Valerie turned to Devin, her voice trembling with urgency.

"Where is he going?" she demanded.

Devin shook his head, his expression fraught with uncertainty. "I don't know, but I think Ryan may have an idea."



# CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

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# SWEET DREAMS

Ryan found himself amidst the Norton Fall Festival, enveloped by a sea of parents and children, high schoolers, and college students, all basking in the glow of the Ferris wheel and myriad attractions. The fairgrounds, though modest in size, pulsed with life, resembling nothing more than a bustling shopping center parking lot. Amidst the throng, he spotted Christina walking alongside Colin. Tonight, they were with their families—Colin with the other foster kids from his house, Christina with her grandmother. Not a sign of his brother, Devin, or Valerie and Scott—apparently, they hadn't arrived yet.

The radio blared out current hits, adding to the festive atmosphere. Children giggled as they reached for cotton candy cones, oblivious to their surroundings, while couples stole kisses behind the funhouse and house of mirrors. The festival seemed just as Ryan had envisioned—rides, food, and people.

But beneath the surface, something felt off.

Ryan couldn't feel the chill of the night air, and everything seemed to move in slow motion around him. Glancing down, he realized he was only wearing socks on his feet. As Colin and Christina approached, Ryan observed them conversing animatedly, yet their words seemed muted, like a silent movie playing out before him. Christina waved with a smile, and Colin followed suit, their laughter ringing hollow in Ryan's ears.

The world around him froze in time. The rides halted, and chatter ceased, leaving only the faint strains of Hall & Oates' *Maneater* drifting from the radio. Christina and Colin continued to smile at him expectantly, unaware of the eerie stillness enveloping them.

Ryan strained to respond, to join in their laughter, but his voice failed him. Panic surged within him as he realized he was trapped, unable to warn his friends of the impending danger. A shadow loomed nearby, and before Ryan could react, a werewolf lunged towards Christina and Colin.

Paralyzed with terror, Ryan watched helplessly as the beast's jaws closed around Christina's head, her smile frozen in place. Blood sprayed, painting a macabre tableau as the creature tore her apart before his eyes.

Colin stood still, his accusatory gaze piercing Ryan, until the wolf felled him as well..

Face to face with the werewolf, Ryan screamed, his voice lost in the void. But then, a gentle touch on his shoulder broke through the nightmare, pulling him back from the brink.

“Ryan!” a familiar voice rang out.

He blinked awake to find his brother, Valerie, and Scott looming over him in the living room. “Sweet Christ! What?” Ryan exclaimed, nearly tumbling off the couch. They had startled him awake, the remnants of his vivid dream still clinging to his senses. But dreams, especially the nightmares, often blurred with reality. It took a moment for him to anchor himself back to the present.

“It happened! Eric turned into a... a thing... a monster, and he almost killed my dad,” Scott stammered, his voice on the verge of breaking. Ryan had never seen such raw emotion in his friend's eyes before. For weeks, Ryan had carried the weight of hopelessness and anxiety alone, thinking he was the only one burdened by the truth. Now, with Scott's revelation, the reality of their situation was laid bare. His friends and family were now fully aware of the danger lurking in Norton, and it was time for them to unite and confront the darkness haunting his family.

Scott recounted the events which had unfolded barely twenty minutes ago, confirming what Ryan had feared. Yet now wasn't the moment for him to revel in being right or to offer the hollow consolation of *I told you so*.

“Where do you think he would go?” Valerie's voice trembled with desperation.

Ryan didn't know.

*How could I possibly predict where an animal would go next, especially if the werewolf has taken control of Eric's mind? How am I supposed to know any of this?* Ryan pushed himself up from the couch and began to pace. "I need time to process. I can't just conjure up answers out of thin air. I'm not some oracle. I'm just a guy trying to piece together clues from Halloween night, not decipher the workings of an animal's mind!"

As he spoke, Ryan's gaze drifted towards Layla's room, drawn by the colorful lights emanating from within. The others followed his line of sight, observing as Ryan hesitated before entering her room, where Layla sat quietly beside her Lite-Brite set, silently waiting for Ryan to acknowledge her creation.

A flood of memories from the past rushed into Ryan's mind, overwhelming him—

He found himself transported to Colin's house during his birthday party, where they all gathered around the dinner table, devouring pizza. Vivid memories flooded back — the spirits lurking behind his friends, Colin, Alicia, Luis, Isaiah, and Alex. Their bodies torn apart before his eyes haunted him, along with the urgent voices echoing in his mind: *Help them! Save yourself! Save them! Save us!* As he grappled with these haunting recollections, the scene around him seemed to collapse, folding in on itself like origami, unveiling another moment from Thanksgiving.

He now saw himself holding Christina behind the shed after dinner. It was a vivid memory — she was crying about her parents, something she had kept hidden from everyone else. Ryan recalled the moment clearly; she appeared so lost and vulnerable in his arms. Then, inexplicably, Christina ceased moving, and as Ryan glanced over, he witnessed her body beginning to disintegrate, crumbling apart like ash. *This happened! But how does this connect?*

It felt like an out-of-body experience as he watched himself desperately trying to piece her back together, only for her remains to slip through his fingers, disintegrating into nothingness like fine soot.

Ryan found himself back in his house, away from recent haunting memories, his gaze fixated on the mesmerizing lights in front of him. Devin and the others approached from behind, peering into Layla's room. "I know where it's headed. I should have pieced it together sooner. They've been trying to warn me!" Ryan exclaimed, a sense of urgency in his voice.

Valerie exchanged a puzzled glance with Devin, unsure of what her younger brother was referring to. Devin shrugged, equally baffled, and turned to Scott, who mirrored their confusion.

"I need to grab my things. We have to act before it's too late!" Ryan called out from down the hallway; his tone urgent. "Who's in danger?" Scott demanded, raising his voice as Ryan grabbed his coat and shoes.

"Christina. Colin. And some of the kids from his house. At least them. I should have connected the dots. Nothing's a coincidence anymore! I should have seen it coming!" Ryan muttered to himself, his gestures bordering on frantic, prompting concern from those around him.

Devin and Valerie entered Layla's room, drawn to the colorful glow of the Lite Brite. As they approached, they saw Layla's creations illuminated

on the ceiling — a Ferris wheel, peanuts, and various structures represented by boxes. "I'm not sure why I made this. They just seemed important," Layla explained, her tone uncertain. Ryan listened to his sister's words, a realization dawning upon him — the spirits within weren't malevolent; they were warning them. "Let's go! We need to reach the festival!" Ryan's urgency echoed through the room. Devin scooped up Layla and headed to Melvin's house, while the others readied themselves. He asked if Layla could stay there for a while, not needing to explain further. Melvin understood; they all did. The consequences of their actions on Halloween night were catching up, and now it fell on the younger generation to make things right.

Scott's fear was palpable. For the first time, Ryan's usually steadfast friend was at a loss for words, paralyzed by the terror of facing Eric. "I can't do it," he confessed, his body tense on the couch.

"Please, man. I need you there with me," Ryan implored, "You're the bravest guy I know."

"It's too much," Scott protested, curling into himself.

For a moment, Ryan considered letting Scott stay behind, until a mischievous thought crossed his mind. "If you don't come, I'll spill the beans about you and Ramona Dankworth's make out session with her headgear and how it gave you a big 'ol floppy one," he threatened, a sly grin playing on his lips.

Scott glared at Ryan, a mixture of anger and resignation in his eyes. "God, I hate you sometimes," he muttered.

"No, you don't," Ryan retorted, pulling him up from the couch.

With a sense of trepidation, they rushed out of the house and piled into the Turbo. The typical nervousness of butterflies fluttering in their stomachs felt more akin to razorblades carving out ulcers as they headed towards the festival. Ryan stole a glance back at his home, noticing the eerie glow of Layla's Lite Brite upstairs. It was a chilling reminder of the peril they were about to face, guided by the innocent art inspired by the whispers of the departed.





# CHAPTER

# TWENTY NINE

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# THE KILLING MOON

*Fate.*

Little Justin Davis gripped his father's hand tightly as they stepped into the festival grounds. It was his inaugural visit, and the dazzling array of flashing lights promised a memorable experience. At five years old, Justin wasn't tall enough for the roller coasters, but he didn't mind. There were plenty of other attractions to explore and enjoy with his father, Charlie. Like the Tilt-a-Whirl, or even better yet, The Gravity Rush—the *one that spins and yanks you around really fast!* He had been looking forward to this one for weeks, and he would get on that ride. *Wait. What's that,* Justin asked himself catching the sight of the festival ride known as The Mambo. Similar to The Gravity Rush, but with even more thrilling flips and spins, it seemed to reach dizzying heights. Although he knew he was too small to ride it now, Justin couldn't help but set it as a future goal, even if it seemed unattainable for the time being.

The array of tempting foods passing by caught Justin's attention, particularly one resembling long pieces from his Play-Doh factory, coated in sugar, cinnamon, and other tasty toppings. Corndogs, drinks, and other indulgent treats beckoned to the attendees. Amidst the screams of thrill seekers and the pleas of those eager to disembark from the rides, the chilly November air enveloped them. Parents hurried their children along, their faces adorned with hardened snot from the cold. As Justin and his dad, Charlie, paused to take in the scene, a group of rowdy kids caught their attention, weaving through the crowd.

Devin's authoritative voice cut through the commotion, urging the youngsters to quiet down and avoid attracting unwanted attention. Valerie's gaze drifted towards the nearby woods, a perfect hiding spot for any lurking dangers. Ryan couldn't shake the feeling that once the authorities learned of Rick Donovan's animal attack, a curfew would be swiftly imposed. However, for now, the night remained eerily quiet, with a sense of impending danger lurking just beyond the festivities.

Scott remained close to Ryan as they scoured the festival grounds for their loved ones. Thoughts of his father weighed heavily on his mind, especially considering the state Eric had left him in before disappearing into the night on all fours. The fact his father was moving offered a glimmer of

hope, but Scott couldn't shake the worry gnawing at him. All he could do was cling to the sight of his father's movement and convince himself everything would eventually be okay.

A teenage couple began making out around the other side of the shopping plaza where the local grocery store stood. Things were heating up between them, but the young lady had no interest in having sex behind a shopping center near a set of dumpsters.

Her boyfriend didn't give a shit.

The bushes next to them began to shake as twigs snapped. The girl turned her head to see what was making noise as the guy took her movement to mean she wanted a little neck action. "You hear that?" she asked him, only to get, "Sorry. Somethings not agreeing with me." The girl curled her lip and slapped him on the top of his head. "Not that! Don't be gross!" Her boyfriend rubbed the top of his head, disappointed the mood had been spoiled.

"I want to go back," she told him. He began to walk towards her with his arms out, ready to put them around her waist again. "Not yet, babe. I want to stay a little longer."

"I don't like this. I want to go back and listen to the live band," the girlfriend demanded. "I want to listen to the music." Her boyfriend approached her with a cheesy smile, raised eyebrows, and replied with a tacky answer, "We can listen to music, or maybe we can just listen to our own." The girl looked at her dumb boyfriend and muttered, "That is the worst thing I have ever heard."

"You love it," the boyfriend implied, and with a smile and a sigh, the girlfriend said, "I do. Dammit. I do." They both laughed, readying their mouths to french kiss again.

A large body leapt towards the couple. They felt animal fur against their faces before realizing anything had lunged at them. The boy looked his fate in the eyes. He heard its snarl and saw its face wrap around his, chewing his cheeks off. The girlfriend managed to let out a quick scream before the wolf took its claw, slicing the sides of her mouth and causing her to choke on her own blood.

The couple's mutual, goofy friend left the festivities to find them—and by finding, he wanted to catch them in makin' it behind the building. He tiptoed around the premises for a couple of minutes before coming upon a

black figure moving on the grocery store's pavement. It peered at him as the friend believed his friend was *gettin' some* and was on top.

"Hell yeah! Get it!"

The shadow halted its movement. "Don't let me interrupt," their friend quipped as he approached. Circling around a dumpster, he stumbled upon his friends sprawled on the grimy pavement, their bodies battered and their clothes in tatters. Emerging from the darkness, the ominous shape of a large wolf poised itself for an imminent attack.

Everything felt eerily familiar to Ryan, the backdrop reminiscent of the dreams he had experienced before Devin roused him earlier. Standing still, he shut his eyes, attempting to discern his next move. Perhaps Layla's spectral guides were endeavoring to convey a message, guiding him toward the course of action he needed to take.

Ryan and Scott navigated through the throng of festival-goers, searching for Colin and Christina amidst the bustling crowd. The queues for the rides seemed shorter than usual, likely due to the chilly night dissuading many from venturing out. Pushing past the shooting gallery and various food stalls, Scott spotted Colin standing in line with his foster siblings, preparing to board The Gravity Rush. Across the way, the larger version, The Mambo, loomed, with others eagerly awaiting their turn. Acting as the responsible older brother, Colin took charge, leading his younger foster siblings—Alicia, Luis, Isaiah, and Alex—onto The Gravity Rush for a thrilling ride. *All the kids in that dream, the vision I had at the party*, Ryan thought to himself.

Up a mere several feet from The Gravity Rush stood the staple Ferris Wheel. Scott nudged Ryan, indicating Christina was boarding it with her grandmother, Jo. Ryan observed as his girlfriend gracefully stepped into the swaying carriage, assisting her grandmother in finding her seat and settling down. With their friends securely buckled in, they eagerly awaited the exhilarating ride, anticipating the breeze tousling their hair as they soared through the night sky.

*Something feels off.*

Ryan's vision blurred once more as he scanned the festival grounds, desperately searching for his friends among the bustling crowd. A pounding headache gripped him as the cacophony of grinding metal and screeching gears assaulted his senses. The source of the dreadful metallic clamor became evident—The Mambo. Though no expert in machinery, Ryan

instinctively knew the unsettling noises emanating from the ride spelled danger for its occupants.

One by one, the rides lurched into motion: The Mambo, followed by the Ferris Wheel carrying Christina, and finally The Gravity Rush with Colin and the other kids. Images of metal clanging and bolts rattling loose invaded Ryan's mind, intensifying his agony. He sank to his knees, grasping for someone, anyone, to acknowledge his frantic warnings.

"Run! It's here! It's killed my friends!" a voice cried out in the distance, sending shivers down Ryan's spine. Security personnel rushed towards the source of the commotion, urging the panicked individual to calm down and explain. Pointing towards the shopping center, the young man bolted away, fully aware of the imminent danger pursuing him.

The yellow-jacketed security guards exchanged uncertain glances, unsure of how to respond. Before they could react, a shadowy figure darted between them, knocking them off balance. It was Eric—a werewolf.

Exposed to the crowd, the beast prowled the festival grounds, snapping and snarling at those who dashed past, desperate to flee. It was Ryan's first glimpse of Eric's altered state. Pointing in horror, Scott shouted, "That's him! That's him!" Despite his appearance, traces of Eric's humanity lingered—the fur bore a hue reminiscent of his fiery red strands, and a familiar scowl adorned the creature's face.

Panic swept through the crowd, sending people scrambling over one another, disregarding injuries in their frantic bid to escape the creature's wrath. Some stumbled over the rail guards meant to corral visitors, oblivious to anything but the instinct to survive. The werewolf, however, focused its attention on those who strayed from the safety of the crowd.

As men and women sought refuge near the active rides, the flesh-obsessed canine targeted those who had fallen, savagely tearing away at their bones. A woman, wearing a red hat and scarf, thrashed in desperation as the creature tore chunks from her face, savoring the taste of blood spilling onto the concrete below.

The operator of The Mambo seized a bat, prepared to confront the menacing beast. With determination, he descended the metal ramp, confronting the creature with a defiant shout. "Come on, you ugly mutt!" he bellowed, his voice echoing above the chaos. The wolf paused in its attack, its growls echoing in the night air. In the operator's stout figure, it saw a resemblance to Eric's father, triggering a primal response.

*We want him!*

Without a hint of resistance from either persona, the werewolf rose to its full height, looming menacingly over the man who dared to challenge it.

The ride operator brandished his bat, retreating up the ramp he had just descended, his warnings falling on deaf ears as the wolf advanced steadily towards him. It seemed to relish in the operator's fear, toying with him as he backed away, his retreat halted only by the control unit for the ride at the path's end. Meanwhile, The Mambo continued its relentless rotation, the cacophony of metal grinding against metal intensifying.

As one of three massive metal arms carrying eight riders per side wobbled, Colin and his foster family above on The Gravity Rush were oblivious to the chaos below. To them, it was a moment of fleeting joy, an escape from their troubles. But beneath them, pandemonium reigned.

*Something bad is going to happen.*

The ride operator's bravado crumbled, replaced by desperate sobs as he clung to his bat, hoping the menacing beast before him would relent. His dreams of heroism shattered; he whimpered like a frightened child on the verge of surrender.

With a swift motion, the wolf swatted the bat aside, then plunged its claws into the operator's chest, tearing through flesh and bone, extracting chunks of his heart and smoke stained lungs. As the operator's life ebbed away, he collapsed onto the control panel, inadvertently triggering a cascade of sparks and metal.

Ryan watched in horror as The Mambo accelerated to a dizzying speed, screams of terror echoing through the air. His heart pounded with dread as he prayed fervently for some safety mechanism to halt the chaos. Yet, if such a mechanism existed, it remained stubbornly inactive.

The Mambo's metal groaned, and bolts sheared off, hurling a bench carrying eight people into the air. Their screams abruptly halted as their airborne seats careened violently, colliding with the nearby Ferris wheel before hurtling towards The Gravity Rush. With each collision, havoc ensued as the pieces of the attractions became entwined with one another. The metal of two sets of bucketed containers of The Gravity Rush, each capable of holding four people each, tore from their unmaintained bolts on the steel arm that once supported them, causing several to fall.

Terror gripped Ryan's heart as he cried out in anguish, overwhelmed by the unfolding tragedy before him. He could only imagine what was going

through his friend's minds now.

*I didn't do it right! This is my fault!*

Time stretched, each moment elongating into what seemed like eternity as the townsfolk stood frozen in shock. Some fled, their cries mingling with the sounds of destruction, while others remained transfixed by the unfolding catastrophe. In a cruel twist of fate, Ryan was forced to bear witness to the grim spectacle of death.

The Ferris Wheel, once a beacon of joy, now twisted and buckled under its own weight. Ryan watched in horror as it collapsed, crushing everything in its path. People trapped in their seats struggled futilely against the safety restraints, only to be ensnared and crushed as the wheel ground mercilessly over them. The sickening crunch of bones and guts echoed through the air as the wheel toppled onto its side, maiming those struggling to avoid the crushing steel.

Driven by desperation ready to succumb to dread, Ryan dashed towards the wreckage, his heart pounding with a mixture of fear and hope. Scott trailed behind, his face a mask of despair. They hurdled over the metal barriers, intent on finding any sign of their loved ones amidst the chaos. But before they could reach the wreckage, festival security intercepted them, barring their path with firm grips on their arms.

As they argued with the security guards, Scott's gaze drifted upwards, his expression crumbling with defeat. Ryan watched helplessly as his friend's spirit seemed to wither before his eyes. Then, following Scott's gaze, Ryan's heart plummeted as he beheld the horrifying sight ahead, causing him to collapse to his knees in despair.

Strands of blonde hair floated in the wind, attempting to fly as the Ferris Wheel's crumpled metal still held onto a body on the ground. Ryan recognized this shade of blonde—platinum. He had seen it almost every day since elementary school. Sometimes he would catch its scent when she wasn't looking, which she would jokingly call him out on. The wind blew so hard that some of the platinum blonde hair traveled into his mouth. As the madness continued, people scattered as the wolf stalked through the grounds, finding prey. Ryan fell, tears streaming down his face, but he couldn't muster a sound. His head began to reel as he realized the magnitude of what had happened on this terrible night—his friends were dead.

He looked over to his left and saw The Gravity Rush slowing down as the ride operator struggled to stop it. The seats twirled around as they were meant to do—the ones still attached contained adults holding their kids, while children who rode it by themselves cried for their parents. Two bucket seats lay on the ground, with three people in one and two in another, pinned by beams meant to protect them. Colin's arms stretched out over the other two when they all succumbed to the seats' impact that had fallen from The Gravity Rush. Colin Hill, a boy who chose to protect his foster siblings until the end, perished alongside them, their eyes closed from an unfortunate series of events.

Ryan placed his hands on the heavy beams, desperately lifting and pulling to move them off his friends bodies, but instead fell, giving in to his weakness. He crawled to each one, moving their collars and hair to discover a pulse, but finding only blood and the smell of defecation. *They died in a freak accident because I wasn't fast enough!* He looked at his hands, desperate to clean the blood from them. He wanted to yell but knew no one would hear as they rushed to save their own lives.

The werewolf came from behind to confront Ryan.

He knew what was behind him.

He knew.

He knew and he didn't care, *not anymore*. Eric, the boy, the poor soul disguised as a werewolf grabbed Ryan by the neck and tore his jugular out without a fight. Ryan's eyes closed as he watched his insides fall to the ground.

*I deserve this.*

\*\*\*

*...No, you don't...Just breathe...*

\*\*\*

Ryan gasped for air, his heart pounding as he found himself standing in the middle of the concrete path leading to the fair's entrance and exit, Scott by his side. Something had touched him, not just physically, but in his mind—an ethereal presence, *maybe the same one Layla spoke to*. Ryan glanced at his hands, now clean, but he knew they would soon be dirty again if he didn't act swiftly.



"I'm not sure," Ryan replied, thinking Scott asked him what was wrong, still trying to make sense of the experience. "But we need to keep moving." They resumed their walk, Ryan's thoughts still lingering on the mysterious encounter and the feminine voice who urged him to return.

*She sounded young*, he thought.

"Eric is here, somewhere. We need to get these people's attention, or some bad shit is about to happen!" Ryan urgently notified Scott, who immediately grasped the gravity of the situation. Without hesitation, Scott began frantically waving his arms and shouting, "I saw the animal that's been killing people! It's here! You need to get out of here! Get your kids!" He repeated his warning until security noticed and approached him. Meanwhile, Ryan dashed past his friend, leaving him to deal with the security guards.

As Ryan approached The Gravity Rush, he saw Colin and the other foster kids preparing to board the ride. He couldn't let them go through with it, and he was prepared to physically drag them away if necessary. People began to believe Scott's warnings as he ran around the grounds, spreading fear while being pursued by security. "Colin! We need to get out of here!" Ryan shouted, trying to make himself heard over the commotion. Confused, Colin looked around at the chaos unfolding. "What's going on?" he yelled back. "We're about to get on the ride!"

"It's here! We have to go!"

Colin paused and looked around again and back at the younger foster kids staring up at him. He knew what Ryan meant, even though he hadn't fully believed it yet. The ride isn't that important, Colin thought. He told his foster siblings something was wrong with the ride, and they'd have to come back later, which wasn't a total lie. If they stayed, Colin and the other kids might have succumbed to the fate Ryan saw in his vision.

As Scott weaved through the crowd, desperately trying to spread the word of impending danger, his gaze locked onto Christina. She stood near the Ferris wheel, about to board with her grandmother. Scott called out her name, his voice echoing amidst the chaos, "Christy! Christy!" Confusion clouded her expression as she raised her hands in bewilderment. "Ryan's here! It's here! The werewolf is here!" Scott's words sounded as frantic and nonsensical as he feared they would.

Jo, Christina's grandmother, turned to her, seeking an explanation for the commotion. Christina hesitated, torn between watching Colin's frantic

attempts to reach his foster siblings and Scott's urgent warnings. As Colin struggled to pull his family from the ride, Christina held her breath, hoping they would heed his words.

But they didn't.

The ride operator intervened, pushing Colin back into the line, dismissing his pleas. Frustration etched Colin's face as he watched his family board the ride against his warnings. Sensing the escalating danger, Christina urged her grandmother to leave, and without protest, Jo agreed, never fond of the rides herself.

Meanwhile, Ryan scanned the fairgrounds with growing dread. Despite his frantic warnings, most people continued to board the rides, oblivious to the imminent peril. "What are you doing? Get off! Get off the rides!" Ryan's pleas fell on deaf ears, dismissed as the antics of unruly teenagers. As he searched for another way to alert the crowd, he spotted a young man sprinting toward the festival from the direction of the shopping center.

"Run! It's here! It killed my friends!" the young man yelled in the distance. He approached some of the security who was already attempting to detain Scott, who stopped and watched as a giant wolf emerged from the darkness, staring at him. *This was the person that stumbled across his friends behind the store*, Ryan recognized. Scott ran towards the people again, screaming in a higher octave than Ryan ever thought possible from a guy—a squealing siren alerting the crowd.

*Here we go.*

Ryan's heart sank as he realized the unfolding events mirrored his earlier vision, albeit with some minor differences. Some individuals had heeded the warnings and left, but the rides continued to operate at full throttle. With a sinking feeling, he understood it fell upon him to divert the creature's attention from the unsuspecting operator of The Mambo.

As Scott sprinted toward him, Ryan felt a surge of relief knowing his friend had managed to shake off the pursuing werewolf. Eric's massive stature paid no heed to Scott, the attention of the crowd now fixated on the teenager urgently alerting them to the impending danger.

"Typical," Scott muttered as he reached Ryan's side, his voice tinged with frustration. "When a kid says something, the adults ignore it, but when an older high school student does, everyone listens." The irony of the situation wasn't lost on either of them as they prepared to confront the

looming threat head-on. *I'm relatively sure they listened to the sound of a teenage boy screeching like a girl.*

Ryan shot a wry glance at his friend and retorted, "Yeah, because causing a commotion is definitely the most effective strategy right now. Not like calmly talking to security could've helped." Scott bristled at the sarcasm. "Hey, I was trying to get everyone's attention. Do you really think they would've listened and evacuated based on what I said?" It was a valid point; one Ryan couldn't refute. While Scott's approach had spurred some to leave, it hadn't been enough to trigger a mass exodus.

As panicked crowds surged towards the exit, a looming figure emerged on the horizon, moving steadily towards the back of the festival grounds, its predatory gaze scanning for its next victim. People scrambled over guardrails, fleeing from the advancing creature. Scott instinctively pulled Ryan aside, uncertainty etched on his face.

"We have to keep Eric away from The Mambo ride. Something doesn't feel right about it," Scott stated, casting a worried glance around. Turning to Ryan, he pressed, "How do you know that?" With time running short, Ryan could only muster a vague response, "I just do." Christina's voice pierced through the chaos, urging them to leave. Ignoring her plea, Ryan knew he had to stay, even if neither Christina nor Scott could grasp the urgency.

"Stay back!" the man by The Mambo's control board shouted. It was like déjà vu for Ryan, a chilling familiarity with the unfolding chaos. Spotting a metal chair nearby, Ryan seized it, ready to use whatever makeshift weapon he could find to keep the approaching menace at bay—*like they do in the circus with lions*. It wasn't a well thought out plan. He ran towards the grass and lifted the chair, ensuring the legs faced outwards.

"What the hell are you going to do with that?" Christina yelled, surprising Ryan, expecting Scott to be the one to say it. "I'm with her. What are you going to do with that?" Scott chimed in. Ryan glared at both of them and curled his mouth, "I don't know! You got a better idea?"

"Yeah! I do! It rhymes with 'let's get the hell out of here!'" a frightened Scott answered.

*I can't do that. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something bad happened, and I could have stopped it.*

Ryan pressed forward, his heart pounding as he closed in on the menacing wolf. The festival worker, already backed into a corner near the

control panel, looked on with terror, knowing any moment the machinery could malfunction catastrophically.

As the werewolf drew back its hand to strike, Ryan seized the metal chair and hurled it with all his might. It struck the creature on the back of its head, emitting a deafening clang as it crashed onto the metal ramp beneath. Momentarily stunned, the beast staggered to its feet, its attention now squarely fixed on Ryan, who stood defenseless, his only weapon expended. It squinted his eyes, recognizing Ryan, snarling, ready to leap towards him.

Panic surged through Ryan as he frantically scanned his surroundings for anything he could use to defend himself. The advancing monster forced him to retreat, his legs trembling with each step. "Come on, Eric, you ugly hound," he muttered under his breath, desperately hoping to distract the werewolf long enough to discover how to escape.

But the werewolf quickened its pace, closing in on Ryan with predatory intent. Realizing staying put meant certain doom, Ryan bolted towards the exit, the sound of the beast's pursuit echoing behind him. Yet, as he ran, the footsteps faded into the chaos behind him, leaving him momentarily relieved.

However, amidst the clamor, a distinct sound pierced the air—a child's cry. Whirling around, Ryan's blood ran cold as he saw Eric, his, its eyes fixed on a young boy, poised to strike.

*You know the morsels are the tastier of all options.*

*You should have a tiny one before the night ends.*

Drunk on the power of the werewolf within him, Eric had lost touch with his own identity beneath the imposing exterior. He had surrendered to the primal urges—the hunting, the killing, the consumption of human flesh. In his conversion, he shed any semblance of empathy or connection to the people of Norton, Ohio.

Eric harbored no love for the townsfolk, for they had never bothered to extend even the pretense of concern towards him. Despite his rebellious demeanor and outward defiance, no one had ever taken the time to inquire about his state of well-being or if something was amiss. To Eric, they were all self-absorbed, indifferent to the struggles of others, lost in their own little worlds.

*No. Not a child! Anything but that! We are survivors, but that's plain murder! There is no sport in hunting the defenseless,* Eric told his werewolf persona.

*You know nothing!*

*You will feed because size and maturity have nothing to do with it!*

Little Justin Davis found himself separated from his father amidst the chaos of fleeing crowds. It was his first time being far from his father, and fear gripped him tightly. He couldn't comprehend the situation, lost in sobs and desperate cries for his daddy, biting his lip in anguish.

"Stop!" Ryan's voice pierced through the turmoil as he shouted at the advancing werewolf, desperate to draw its attention from the terrified child. He scanned the ground frantically, searching for anything to hurl at the beast. Then, a barrage of objects rained down upon the creature—empty beer bottles, assorted debris—thrown by none other than his brother Devin and Valerie.

Devin brandished a metal pole adorned with decorative flags, while Valerie wielded a makeshift arsenal of bottles gleaned from a nearby booth. "Stop, Eric!" Devin's voice rang out, confronting the monster with fierce determination. The werewolf, heedless of their identities, turned to face them with a menacing snarl.

Scott and Christina joined Ryan, standing firm beside him, united in purpose. It was a rare moment of solidarity, and Ryan prayed it wouldn't be their last.

"Come for us! Come on!" they all began to yell, still attempting to take the wolf's focus off the child. But just like Eric, the monster knew their ruse and decided to disregard them. The wolf crept down and stuck its rear end out, readying its stance to attack. Devin was the first to run towards the little boy. Justin cried at *the big, mean, scary doggie*, wanting his dad, wondering why he had left him. The wolf barked as it readied his hind legs to spring at little Justin Davis, ready to destroy his tiny body.

Two men came to Justin's aid in the nick of time. Charlie Davis finally found his son near The Gravity Rush along with an officer he summoned for help to find his boy. His father didn't think anything of the wolf but rather the twirling metal bins holding the people swinging near his son. Charlie hopped the gate and tackled his son, forcing them to lay on the ground.

Devin ran towards the animal to interrupt it from attacking the boy and his dad by swinging the metal pole he held towards the animal, smashing its snout. The beast squealed as its face pulsed from the impact, struggled to rise after the blow to its head. Devin landed on his side and turned towards

the little boy, Justin, and his father, Charlie. He watched little Justin stand back up, happy to see his dad again.

Charlie smiled at his son as he stood back up to walk from everything happening and go back home. “I think we’ve had enough of an adventure, don’t ya think, spor....”

Everyone involved—Ryan, Scott, Christina, Devin, and Valerie—watched as one of the metal seats from The Gravity Rush collided with the back of Charlie Davis’s head, decapitating him, his blood sprayed onto his little boy’s face. Justin choked on his breath not knowing what had just happened to his father. Attempting not to swallow his father’s fluids spewing from his torso, Justin ignored his father’s head with the open eyes to pat his back hoping he was just choking, like his father did for him to feel better. The metal alone would have killed Charlie, but something else slammed against his skull.

A teenage girl screamed as The Gravity Rush continued. No one had realized what had just happened. The ride stopped, and the young woman wailed, “I didn’t see him. I couldn’t move fast enough!” Everyone, including the operator, raced over to help, but no one expected to see—*that*. The girl held on to her leg, shrieking for help. No one understood the matter until they moved closer. The bottom part of her left leg dangled off her knee. Her leg had collided with Charlie Davis’s head, shattering her leg in multiple places, taking a minor role in his beheading.

Justin Davis wiped his face, not understanding what had just happened to his father. He looked down at his hands to find red smeared across his palms. Valerie leaped over the fence and enveloped him in her arms, leading him from his father’s lifeless body sprawled on the grass beneath the ride which had claimed his life.

*There was no simple fix. There were going to be casualties no matter what I did. Why did it have to be that little boy’s burden to bear?* Ryan remembered little Justin from the beginning of his vision, understanding more of the cause and effect of his actions.

The werewolf regained its composure, looming over Ryan as he scrambled to escape. An unseen rock on the concrete sent him tumbling to the ground, his heart pounding with terror. This was the monster’s doing, and it knew it, relishing its power. Standing tall on its hind legs, the creature cast a menacing shadow over Ryan, who refused to beg for mercy, even as police lights flashed in the distance. He wouldn’t give in—not tonight. The

eerie glow of the police lights illuminated the werewolf's sleek fur and blood stained claws as it prepared to strike.

Suddenly, the sharp crack of gunfire echoed through the air, punctuating the tense atmosphere. Bullets tore into Eric, causing it to convulse in agony with each hit. Despite his fear, Ryan couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for Eric—the boy trapped within the beast. As the creature collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain, Devin and Valerie rushed to its side, hoping to find some semblance of humanity within.

Valerie hesitated, unsure whether to reach out to the creature. With a trembling hand, she gently placed her palm against Eric's fur, her heart heavy with emotion. Tears streamed down her face as she caressed the creature, mourning not for the beast, but for the person it once was.

"Hey, buddy," Devin choked out, his voice thick with emotion. "It hasn't been a great day, has it?" Though Eric couldn't respond, he heard his friend's words, feeling the weight of their shared sorrow. As tears welled in his eyes and his body trembled with pain, Eric's humanity began to resurface, a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness.

Valerie laid her head on the wolf's chest as police officers slowly walked toward it, ordering Valerie and Devin to step away. "I am so sorry for everything that happened to you," Valerie whispered to Eric, hurting for her friend and the terrible life only a few knew about. It could have been better for Eric—it *should have been*.

Scott and Christina hurried over to Ryan, offering him their support as he rose from the ground. Together, they watched solemnly as Devin and Valerie mourned their fallen friend, the werewolf's eyes closing for the final time. As the creature's body shifted back to its human state, a sense of unease settled over the officers who had fired the fatal shots.

With the crowd dispersing, only the Akron police and the five friends remained to witness the grim scene. They averted their eyes from Eric Flanagan's lifeless body, lying naked on the ground amidst the remnants of the Norton Fall Festival. Despite Eric's antagonism towards Ryan and his friends, they never wished such a fate upon him—or anyone else.

Turning their bodies away, the group made their way towards the Turbo, pausing briefly as an officer stopped them to ask a few general witness questions. They offered vague responses, reluctant to divulge the full extent of what they had witnessed—a truth too bizarre for the officials to comprehend, much like the local news.

Ryan pondered the events of the evening during the ride home, reflecting on his vision and the young boy who had lost his father. While relieved his friends were safe and the casualties were minimal, he couldn't shake the feeling he could have done something differently to prevent the father's death.

Two thoughts brought him some solace amidst the turmoil. One was the wise words of Mr. Spock, reminding him sometimes the needs of the many outweigh the need of the few—or *the one*. The other was a vision of his mother, her voice echoing in his mind with her sage advice about humility and accepting life's uncertainties.

A solitary tear escaped his eye, a silent tribute to his dearly missed mother. Devin noticed the sorrow in his brother's eyes reflected in the rearview mirror, a silent acknowledgment of their shared grief. They all longed for their mothers' comforting presence, but for now, they had to return home and await their return in the morning.

Valerie and Scott opted to stay the night at Ryan and Devin's house after learning about their father's hospitalization from their mother's call. Christina was dropped off at her house to await her grandmother's arrival. Despite the logical choice of staying at the festival parking lot to search for her grandmother, Christina was too overwhelmed by the night's events to think clearly, still trying to process the chaos and tragedy they had witnessed.

Devin made his way to Mr. Craggs' house to retrieve Layla and take her home. "What happened?" Melvin inquired as Devin prepared to leave. With a heavy sigh, Devin turned to face Melvin, his weariness evident in his voice. "You wouldn't believe it. You'll hear more tomorrow, probably," he replied, his words weighed down by the events of the night.

As Devin headed towards his driveway, Melvin followed closely behind, his curiosity piqued. "I need to know what's going on! Weird things are happening, and I don't want to be caught off guard," Melvin insisted, his tone urgent.

Devin paused, feeling a surge of frustration and exhaustion. Running a hand through his hair, he turned to face Melvin, his voice tinged with irritation. "Melvin, it's late, and I've had a hell of a night. I lost my best friend tonight. It's been a really crappy night, so if you don't mind, I'm going home now. Goodnight," he said tersely, his words laced with bitterness.



As Devin began to walk away with Layla, a sudden realization struck him. He stopped in his tracks and turned back to face Melvin; his expression hardened. "I know you're aware of what's been going on. You knew something was wrong with Eric and chose to stay silent. My little brother is a wreck because of all this, exhausted and filled with fear and anxiety," he stated firmly, his voice tinged with accusation.

In the dim light, Melvin met Devin's gaze with a guarded expression. "Yeah. Parents didn't say anything either?" he admitted reluctantly, his voice tinged with guilt.

"No, they didn't. But god forbid anyone tell the truth!" Devin agreed before adding, "Keep your eyes open. There was one more moon the following day." Melvin didn't respond with a nod or a shaking of his head. Instead, he glared at Devin and cryptically replied, "I hoped everything would turn out fine."

Scott made them all hot chocolate before they headed off to bed for the night, praying the next day would be better. They walked down the hall where Valerie would stay with Devin, and the rest would hang out with Ryan in his room. Bright, colorful lights surprised them when they opened Layla's bedroom door to reveal another picture she had made with her Lite Brite set.

They all saw three stick figures in front of some trees, two boys and a girl. Small white triangles covered the top and bottom of the black paper with red highlights over every other one and a full moon off to the side. Ryan looked over at his sister, proud of her creation, and asked, "It's not over yet, is it?" Layla shook her head slowly and said, "She's really sorry, but there is still one left."

The triangles were teeth coming down on the three figures, ready to eat them, and the Hatcher children were the tiny stick figures stuck in between.



# CHAPTER THIRTY

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# SEND ME AN ANGEL

Everyone woke up earlier than they should have, given their night. Their adrenaline had trouble stabilizing after an arduous night of attempted sleep. Nevertheless, some managed to get a few hours in before waking up around eight in the morning. It was Wednesday, November 29<sup>th</sup>, the last full moon, *well, technically, there is only one real full moon, and that was last night.* Ryan thought about it, attempting to justify not doing what he planned to do tonight. If the dreams of the Norton Festival couldn't wake them up, the telephone ringing would have.

Devin stumbled to the phone as he made coffee for anyone who wanted it. "Hello," he greeted with a groggy voice. *"You sound worse for wear,"* his mother's voice commented, gaining Devin's attention, hoping they weren't already on their way home from their hotel.

"Mom! Everything all right?"

*"All right then, calm down. Everything is fine. Look, we're going to be late coming home because I wanted to get some Christmas shopping in, so on our way home, I thought maybe pick up some Swinson's hamburgers and shakes and whatnot for an early dinner. Then we head back out to the party. Sound good then, yeah?"*

He was relieved they were immediately on their way but wanted to have more time with Valerie. If his mother came home and found her there early in the morning, questions would be asked. *"What's wrong? Got a girl there or something?"* Rebecca nervously laughed.

"Yeah, I mean, no. Just take your time," Devin nervously replied, hoping his parents wouldn't return too soon. He knew what Ryan had planned and wasn't looking forward to playing his part in the setup they discussed overnight. The brothers discussed it while their friends slept, keeping their sister, Layla, out of the know. She realized her ghostly visitors used her as a conduit to relay information. As far as the boys were concerned, it was all she would have knowledge of for as long as possible.

*"Ok, love. Tell your brother I love 'em, and I will see you soon."* Devin's mouth quivered, thinking about what may come next. He wanted to talk to his dad, but his ego kept him from reaching out. "Hey, mom."

“Yeah?”

“I miss you guys.”

A long pause came from the other end. “*We miss you too. See you in a bit.*” Devin stayed on the line until the receiver on her end clicked. He hung up the phone, staring out into the woods where his journey began—this tale of fear and loss. Devin turned to the coffee machine when, through his peripheral vision, he thought he saw multiple people standing on the patio, staring at him through the glass door. He stopped, refusing to move his eyes, afraid to find what he had seen was real.

“What’s wrong?” Valerie asked, poking her head from around the corner. Devin smiled, glad to see she was awake. “Nothing. Just tired, I think. Seeing things,” he answered, unsure, having trouble forming sentences. She sniffed the air, glad to smell the aroma of coffee in the crisp morning. The house was cold, but it was how the Hachers liked it, well, Calvin anyway, trying to keep the monthly bill down during the fall and winter months.

Devin looked down at Valerie's feet and asked, “Aren’t your feet freezing?” She laughed, sipped on her coffee, and told him they were “colder than a witch's tit.” If the Hachers had anything, it was an overabundance of slippers—raccoon head, pink, black leather, brown. With all the hardwood on the top floor, they needed them when it was cold outside. He walked over to the hallway closet and picked out the pink pair. He came back into the kitchen; confident he had found a pair she would like. “So, like, because I’m a girl, I would just love to have the pink ones?” she said expressionlessly. He began to justify his choice until Valerie started to giggle. “Relax. I’m just messin’ with you.”

He didn’t mind being toyed with, but now wasn’t the time. Devin couldn’t understand how Val was so calm, given yesterday and the attack on her father. Valerie saw Devin was not amused, awkwardly coughed, and returned to sipping her coffee. “I’m going to wake Scotty up soon. We need to go home and wait for mom to call or see if she is even home. Maybe go and see dad if we can.”

Devin agreed. “You can call, you know.”

“I know. I just think it's time to walk and let her see we’re okay.”

They both nodded uneasily, uncertain of what to say to one another. The new couple had not yet reached the phase where they could just be silent without it being awkward. “Do you want to talk about last night?” Devin

asked. Valerie sat down at the kitchen table and signed, “Werewolves exist, and our friend was turned into one and went on a rampage. What else is there to say?”

Devin looked away. He wasn’t the best with words but felt they were necessary. “There’s a lot to say. We just don’t know how to yet. This isn’t alright. These things don’t just happen.”

“But they do, don’t they?”

“What do you mean?”

“Events like this probably have happened. If you told me werewolves existed a week ago, I’d think you were nuts. Look at us now. Unsure of how to address it. We don’t even know how to be sad for our friend! Look at what we know now. Just think of what we don’t and what we may discover tomorrow—we don’t know shit.”

Devin nodded. They sipped on their hot beverages, uncomfortable now that they’ve acknowledged the paranormal. Trying to bring some levity, he said, “I just hope vampires aren’t real.” Valerie cut her eyes to him, not appreciating the joke.

"Do you think my dad is one now?" Scott asked Ryan as Christina paced in the garage. She stopped in her tracks when Scott asked the question everyone had been wondering. "If he doesn't die, I mean." Ryan didn't want to answer this question, not wanting to be the bearer of bad news.

“I don’t know,” Ryan told a half-truth. Scott put his finger in Ryan’s face and angrily told him, “Stop that!”

“Stop what?”

“I’ve never blown smoke up your ass about anything! So don’t start with me!” Scott asserted, going back over years of friendship where he was the one who spoke the truth when no one else would. That’s a good friend—one who calls you out on your bullshit.

“Fine,” Ryan said annoyed, ready to get into it. Scott stood up straight with crossed arms, bracing himself for what he was about to hear. Christina walked to the other side of the garage. Confrontations made her nervous when she had to pick a side, especially when she knew both people involved, but there was no side to choose; only one truth mattered. “It’s a good possibility. Is that what you want to hear?”

Scott began to pace just as Christina had moments earlier. “Yeah. That’s what I wanted to hear, dickhead.” Ryan threw his arms and hand in the air,

frustrated by his friend. “What exactly do you want me to say? I have my own shit to deal with today. I warned everybody in this goddamn house! It’s not my fault no one wanted to believe me!”

“How could you expect us to believe something like that, Scott?” Christina interjected. “You’re talking about things you only see in the movies.” Ryan walked away, scoffing at the irony. “The things I see in the movies are the only reason I put anything together.”

“And they said watching TV would make us dumb,” Scott joked. They all smiled, not knowing what to say next. “You know this all starts again next month if you’re right. So what do we— what do I do then?” Ryan felt horrible for his friend, knowing what he and Valerie would have to deal with going forward.

“Would you rather he died?” Christina asked. Scott raised his eyebrows, insulted that she would bring up such a thing. “What? Why would you even ask me that?”

Ryan laid his head against the garage wall, understanding where Christina was going with her question. “I mean, assuming he’s got it in his blood, he’s going to change and probably hurt people. Is it better than death just because he’s your dad?”

“I don’t want to answer that! It’s a shitty answer one way or the other,” Scott answered. Christina crossed her arms and wondered, “How?”

“If you have to ask, you haven’t put yourself in that situation,” he ended the conversation. Scott took the high road in lieu of losing his *cool*, which he was known to do from time to time. Instead, he did the passive-aggressive thing, throwing it back at her. She didn’t mind it. It was insensitive to bring it up so soon after the attacks yesterday. Ryan thought about Devin and Valerie and how they had to watch their friend die and became concerned it would happen to Scott if his dad attacked or bit him. *If Scott were to turn, could I kill someone, a friend I have known most of my life?* Ryan hoped he would never have to find out.

“What happens when it does? When it, you know, happens,” Scott asked, finally posing the question he wasn’t sure he wanted the answer to. “Then we’ll deal with it as best we can,” Ryan assured him.

Scott reached into his camouflage coat pocket. His dad, Rick, made him wear one when he took him hunting for wild animals. Scott didn’t like it then, but later in life, he would have to do what he had to, to protect people from another monster, but it’s another story for another time.

“Swear it,” Scott said, pulling out a cigarette. “I swiped it from my dad's dresser.”

“What's it for?” Ryan asked.

“To ease the tension...it's a cigarette, idiot! You smoke it,” Scott joked with his friend.

“I know, but what does it have to do with what you're talking about?”

“We'll smoke it to finalize the promise. I was thinking of doing the whole blood pact thing, but my mom said there are too many possible diseases in it.”

“So lung cancer is better... awesome,” Christina intervened. Scott scoffed at her, accusing her of making something overdramatic. “It's just one, and we're going to share it! Can't get cancer from one cigarette, jeez!...Right?”

Ryan took the initiative, grabbed the cigarette and lighter, lit it, and took a deep drag, coughing as he exhaled. “Why do people like this?” He passed it back to Scott, unsure of his idea after Ryan gagged on the smoke. Scott took a shorter drag, released the fumes, and shrugged his shoulders, “Not that bad.” He held it between his fingers and thumb, mimicking what he had seen in movies when people passed a joint. Christina curled her lip, disgusted at herself for going along with the promise. She barely put the filter in her mouth. She lightly sucked the nicotine through the filter and immediately exhaled the smoke. “You didn't even inhale!” Scott pointed out, disappointed. Christina put it out with her shoe, telling him to take it or leave it.

Given the circumstances, they all looked out into their neighborhood silently, not needing to talk, enjoying one another's company as best they could. It was quiet, which wasn't unusual. There was a foreboding feeling in the air, with the stillness and clouds covering the sun, creating a dreary day.

“Do you need us to come back later?” Christina's voice cracked; guilty she wanted her boyfriend to tell her “no”. Scott looked over to Ryan, who thought about his answer. Ryan already knew his answer but needed to think about it one last time. “No, there's no sense in you all getting yourselves in danger. It's my, our, problem now. We'll take care of it.”

“What if you can't?” Scott questioned, raising an eyebrow. “It's your dad. Will you be able to do what you have to in the end?” Ryan hated Scott



had put a nugget of doubt in his head, but he made a valid point—he may have to confront his father. *Don't know. Will you?*

“I don't know. I think I can do what's best for everyone, as bad as it may be at first. I don't think my dad would be able to live with himself knowing he killed his family...and I couldn't live knowing I did nothing to stop it.”

Valerie was the first to walk out into the garage to head home. “Scott! We need to go,” she called out. Devin followed her outside, telling Ryan they needed to talk. He knew what his brother wanted but had no desire to engage in conversation. “You gonna be okay?” Scott asked one last time. Ryan looked over to the box of materials and weapons Scott had brought home from his garage. “I'll be good. It will be fine,” Ryan reassured both Scott and Christina.

“By the way. Why does your dad need three sets of handcuffs?” Ryan asked, curious. “Hell if I know, dude. Don't go there, though. I know your mind went to something filthy,” Scott replied, pretending to puke. “I didn't say a word,” Ryan playfully defended himself.

Christina kissed Ryan on the cheek, asking him, “Please be safe.” He smiled at his pretty girlfriend, relieved she was alive, and told her he would figure it out. It didn't make Christina feel any better, but it was the best she would get from him. Their friends walked up the driveway and dispersed in different directions when they approached the first road on the right where Christina lived.

“What do we do now?” Devin asked his little brother. Ryan looked back over to the back and answered, “We get ready. I have an idea.”

“Aren't you afraid you're wrong?”

“If I'm wrong, it will be the best mistake I'll ever make.”

Calvin and Rebecca Hatcher arrived home to find their children ready and waiting for them. Rebecca's need for hugs came in hard and fast. After all this time, the kids would at least have prepared themselves, but Rebecca gobbled them all up in her arms as usual. They released their mom and proceeded to walk upstairs except for Ryan and Calvin, who stood awkwardly.

“What did you end up getting?” Layla asked, snooping for gifts.

“Nothing you need to worry about right now, and don't you go bugging off to find it either,” Rebecca warned her.

Calvin was never the one to initiate a hug between his boys, so Ryan came in for one. It may be the last one he would ever get from him. A typical hug between dad and son was a quick pat on the back, but Ryan stayed for a while longer. “You okay?” Calvin asked his son. Ryan nodded against his chest, letting go without looking his dad in the eyes. He didn’t want him to see his eyes welling up. “It’s been a strange week, dad.”

After they settled in, Ryan and Devin described what had happened over the last couple of days. Neither of them mentioned they were in the middle of it all, except for Devin at the Donovan house. The boys told them about the animal attacking Rick and later when it made it to the festival. They neglected mentioning to them about Eric and his animal tendencies. Their parents didn’t know he died, and neither desired to tell them why and how.

“I’ll tell ya. These animal attacks are really making me think we need to move somewhere a little more crowded. Don’t you think, Cal?” Rebecca nervously asked. Confused, taken by his son’s story about the last two nights, Cal heard his wife’s voice but hardly made out a word she said, mumbling, “Yeah, hon. Maybe.” It wasn’t luck he answered her coherently—it was his default response when he didn’t hear her or wasn’t paying attention.

They didn’t have much time now. The night was coming fast, and Ryan knew his father was becoming fidgety from the lack of attention he paid to his wife and kids. *His mind is somewhere else.*

Devin made his way to the garage to retrieve the box Scott had let them use for tonight. Finally, the plan was ready to be put in motion, and all they had to do was wait for the right time. “Let’s eat our food before it gets cold,” Rebecca yelled at everyone. They all put their hands down the greasy Swinson bags, grabbing their burgers, fries, and milkshakes.

The boys watched their folks and Layla shove food in their mouths as they ate at a steady pace, their appetite lessening with each second, fearing what happens next. It was the first time in a while they observed their mother eat well. She ate a regular kids’ meal, more than she usually consumes as of late. “You gonna eat that?” Layla asked Ryan about his fries. He didn’t answer his sister, so Layla had a go at them without permission.

Facing one another on opposite sides of the dinner table, Ryan and Devin kept eyeing one another, shaking their heads, indicating it wasn’t time yet. Calvin sat with his back to the wall. Rebecca and Layla sat across

from him. Those spots were easy to move from when the moment came, and it will. "What's wrong with you two?" Calvin asked. "You two have been weird ever since we got home."

"It's fine, dad," Ryan said lowly.

"We're just tired," Devin deadpanned.

The sun was almost set over the horizon past the trees. Ryan nodded to Devin, and they began the scheme. "Hey, dad. Scott showed me this really cool trick. Can I do it for you?"

"Sure, pal. Knock yourself out," Calvin agreed, looking at the time. Ryan pushed his seat back, walked to the box, and carried it to the kitchen. A white sheet from the linen closet lay over it, covering the weapons inside. "I'm going to make you disappear." Devin sprung from his chair to help Ryan with his trick as Rebecca and Layla become intrigued how they were going to pull this off.

"Will this take long because we've got to get going soon," a nervous Rebecca asked, looking at the clock in the kitchen. Devin knew she was keeping tabs on the time since they had gotten home, answering, "No. Not too long."

The white bed sheet went over Calvin's face and body, grinning with anticipation. Ryan pulled out a set of handcuffs, placing the key in his pocket. He tossed a set over to Devin, placing one side of the cuffs around their dad's wrists and then to the armrests. "Is this necessary for the trick, guys?" Calvin asked, wondering what they were getting at.

"Don't worry, dad," Devin assured him as he pulled out the rope. "It's very necessary."

Calvin felt a slight rubbing against his neck. The stiff rope fibers poked through the blanket as it became tighter. "I don't think that's safe. I don't like this," Rebecca told her sons, who paid her no mind other than for Ryan to reply, "Trust me, mom. This is the safest thing we can do." Their father flailed his upper body as Devin tied his feet together with a bungee hook.

Layla's expression promptly went from joy to concern. Calvin's face shifted under the sheet. His nose, mouth, and forehead protruding, moving back and forth. He breathed heavily, sucking in the linen with his mouth and blowing it out. "What are you doing?" their little sister yelled.

"Yeah. Come on, boys. Let your father loose," Rebecca politely demanded. "This ain't fun no more."

"Yeah," Calvin agreed under the sheet. "Can't breathe too great. I think you tied it around my neck too tight."

Ryan and Devin moved from the table and over to the box where they would arm themselves—Ryan with a crossbow and Devin with a baseball bat and taser. "Can you see yourself, dad?" Ryan asked.

"No."

"Then it's like you vanished," he ground out through gritted teeth, a surge of pride in his ingenuity mingling with a chilling, almost psychotic urge to wield his bat and end his father's torment once and for all.

"This isn't funny anymore, goddammit! Untie me right now!" The rage beginning to swell inside Calvin made Ryan concerned, wishing they had something to subdue him, *like medicine to make him go to sleep*. He found himself doubting the viability of their plan. What seemed flawless on paper now appeared fragile in the face of execution, as the looming specter of potential last minute disasters cast doubt upon their strategy.

Rebecca's heart raced as she clutched Layla tightly, her mind spinning with fear and confusion. "Have you gone completely mental?" she yelled, her voice trembling with disbelief. Ryan's eyes narrowed as he pointed the crossbow towards his father's head. "Trust us, mom. This is the only way," Devin explained, his voice strained with resolve.

"To make sure he is a werewolf and put him down if he is so he can't hurt people," Ryan added, his tone grave and determined. Rebecca bit her lip, her anger boiling as she searched for words. "That's ridiculous! Let me go!" Calvin demanded, struggling against his restraints.

"No, dad. I don't think we will," Ryan replied firmly, his grip tightening on the weapon. "You have lost your goddamn minds! We have to go now. Let me go!" Calvin pleaded, desperation creeping into his voice.

Rebecca lightly shoved Layla towards the living room, her mind racing with fear and uncertainty. "I'm not dumb, dad!" Ryan retorted; his voice tinged with frustration. "Oh, Ryan. What are you talking about?" Calvin whined, trying to reason with his son.

"I saw what happened that night. Don't play dumb with me!" Ryan snapped with an unwavering gaze. "How Craggs shot the animal, and it was a man underneath. I know you buried him. I saw the scratch marks on you! You all left us to go out, conveniently, during the full moons! How dumb do you think I am? Layla's ghosts showed me things!"

"Layla's ghosts? Ryan, I think you're imagining things. We'll help you! Just let us go out, and we will discuss this tomorrow, I promise," Calvin pleaded, his voice tinged with desperation. But Devin intervened, his voice firm and resolute. "No, dad. We've seen too much. Eric is gone because he was one of those—things! Ryan's not crazy! Stop turning this on him!"

Ryan grew tired of holding the bow, his hands trembling with adrenaline. With a swift motion, he flipped it onto his back using the strap and pulled out his father's gun, the Astra Terminator, his expression grim and determined.

Rebecca gasped, "Don't do what you are thinking of doing!" Ryan looked over to his mother and promised, "I won't do anything if he doesn't turn." The night had already come when Layla began to cry in the entranceway to the kitchen. "It's fine, dear," Rebecca told her daughter, holding her stomach. "They're just confused, that's all."

*No, I'm not.*

Calvin's frantic struggles intensified, the chair's wood groaning and cracking under the strain as he slammed his body against it. Rebecca, thrown from her seat, clutched her stomach in agony, her cries echoing in the stressed air.

"It hurts so bad!" she screamed, laced with pain. Layla, her eyes wide with fear, pleaded with her brothers. "Stop it, Ryan! Stop it, Devin! You're upsetting mommy! You're making her tummy hurt!" she sobbed, her small frame trembling with distress.

But the boys remained resolute, their gazes fixed on their mother as she crawled beneath the table, intent on freeing their father. "Mom? No! Don't do that! He might be dangerous! We can't risk it!... Mom!" Devin's voice rang out in desperation, but Layla's pleas fell on deaf ears.

Ryan peered under the table, his hand still gripping the pistol tightly. "Mom?" His voice wavered with uncertainty. "Are you...?" He felt a surge of fear grip his heart as he loosened his grip on the pistol, his hand trembling with the weight of what he witnessed.

He was wrong.

This whole time—*I was so wrong.*

**"me! Get out of the house!"**

Ryan stumbled backward, staring at his mother's newly molded yellow eyes, looking back at him as her voice deepened. She trembled underneath

the table, hiding, ashamed her children were watching her change into a monster.

“Devin! Untie dad! Now!” Ryan yelled, scooting across the linoleum towards them.

“What. Why?”

“It’s not him. It was never him! It’s mom! She’s the wolf!”

*She had a coat over her that night. Dad put a coat over her. That’s why I couldn’t see any marks on her. It’s not a scratch that turns a person—it’s the bite!*

Rebecca painfully crept from under the table towards Ryan, putting her hand out wanting to touch her boy. Their mom struggled to apologize to Ryan with her eyes. She couldn’t speak her words, just the distorted human screams blended with harrowing howls of a woman and her transmuting body.

Devin began loosening the tie around Calvin’s feet, yelling for him to hold still as he fumbled with the rope. He wanted to take her hand but could only listen to the bones in her fingers extend. They snapped and bubbled, causing Ryan to shiver. Her hands and feet grew longer, stretching until her now large vessels broke through her skin falling onto the floor. The wolf’s claws broke through the tips of her fingers, causing her human nails to split, pulling them back until they fell from her hand.

“Where’s the key? I need the key!” Devin screamed.

Layla began to chew the ends of her fingers, a habit when she became upset or scared. “What’s going on? What’s happening to mommy?” Layla’s hollered at her brothers, muffled. They didn’t have time to comfort her. Their dad was tied down, helpless, and if the wolf inside of their mother found him bound, it would be an easy kill. Rebecca was no longer the mother they knew, and now the boys needed to save their dad from their own misguided doing.

Canine hairs grew from Rebecca’s pores, encompassing her, splitting her skin open to allow her wolf body to grow. Their mother’s clothes tore apart as her body filled. She inched out from under the table, surveying her kitchen and then pointed her nose towards Layla. Rebecca’s human side remained startled, saddened her daughter had to witness her mother’s altering appearance, becoming grotesque.

Rebecca looked at her son one last time before a deep howl of pain bellowed from her. Her face split as her nose and mouth grew outward,

broader. Strands of flesh and blood fell onto her animal body, matting the fur before she shook it off onto the floor, wiggling before it cracked apart further into dust. Ryan and Layla watched the terror on their mother's teeth grow long and sharp with narrow eyes.

Calvin experienced the disturbing sounds of bones snapping and flesh tearing before. He remembered from the night before, when they had driven out to the desolate wilderness to keep her from their children. He had watched from a distance, filled with a mixture of helplessness and dread, as his wife's body underwent its hideous alteration. The memory haunted him, and he vowed never to witness it again.

After that night, he'd taken precautions. He administered tranquilizer darts to Rebecca, ensuring she slept through the tumultuous nights of her transformation. The first night had been the worst, the tranquilizers barely enough to subdue her savage instincts. Calvin still shuddered at the memory of finding her naked in the woods, her primal hunger unleashed upon unsuspecting prey.

Rebecca had awakened disoriented and ravenous, her instincts driving her to the nearby turkey farm. Mr. Jersyk had paid the ultimate price for his unexpected encounter with the transmuted beast. Calvin knew he should have ended it then, put an end to the nightmare which had consumed his wife. But he couldn't bring himself to do it, held back by a mixture of love and fear.

As the night passed and the tranquilizers took effect, Rebecca grew accustomed to their sedative embrace. Yet Calvin knew their luck would eventually run out. The tranquilizers were a temporary solution, a fragile barrier holding back the primal forces within his wife. And one day, the barrier would fail, unleashing a terror that could not be contained.

Ryan swiftly retrieved the handcuff keys and tossed them to Devin, urgency pulsating through the air. Calvin's voice cut through the chaos, thick with the scent of Rebecca's mongrel odor. Devin's hands trembled as he grasped for the keys, his fingers fumbling with the locks as Calvin squirmed in his restraints. Layla's panicked screams echoed in the room, a symphony of fear and confusion.

Devin's heart raced as he struggled to free his father; his mind clouded with images of his mother's transformation. He knew the terror awaiting them, having witnessed it with Eric. Ryan slid beneath the table with desperation etched on his face as he attempted to unlock Calvin's handcuffs.

But each attempt was met with frustration—each key was not the correct one.

Frantically, they exchanged keys, their hearts pounding in unison with each click of the locks. Finally, success—a simultaneous click signaling their liberation. Calvin wasted no time in tearing away the sheet concealing him, his movements fueled by a primal instinct to protect his family.

Amidst the chaos, Layla's screams intertwined with her mother's tortured grunts as the change continued. The werewolf's look took shape, its coat a symphony of dark hues, reminiscent of Rebecca's striking features. Despite the fear, there was a twisted beauty in the creature's shape—a grotesque allure belied its horrific nature.

Calvin's gaze shifted between his wife's beastly cage and his sons, a silent command passing between them. With cautious steps, Ryan and Devin edged towards the living room, their movements deliberate and calculated. Layla, her breath hitched in fear, followed suit, her fingers gnawed raw in her distress.

As their mother loomed over them, her gaze filled with predatory intent, Calvin issued a stern directive—run. With grim determination, Ryan and Devin nodded in silent agreement, their resolve unwavering even in the face of unspeakable horror. With each step towards the door, they clung to the semblance of a plan, grasping at straws in a world unraveling at the seams.

*First, we can't go to Layla's room. I remember for sure. Second, we can't go down the hall to any other bedroom. Instead, we go down the stairs.*

"Go, now!" Calvin yelled, causing the werewolf to bark at the children.

Ryan surged forward, adrenaline coursing through his veins, his every muscle tense with urgency. Devin's footsteps echoed behind him as he scooped up Layla, her fingers desperately stretching towards her mother. The wolf's thunderous pursuit echoed through the house, a relentless predator closing in on its prey. A chair splintered under its weight, eliciting a pained whine, but Calvin's defiant yell only fueled its rage.

With a chilling snarl, the beast turned its attention to Calvin, its eyes gleaming with primal hunger as it loomed over him. In a swift, brutal motion, it backhanded Calvin, hurling him towards the sliding glass door with bone crunching force. The sickening impact reverberated through the room, the glass fracturing ominously around his body crumpled to the floor.



As Rebecca struggled against the primal instincts surging within her, the chaotic scene descended into a frantic battle for survival.

*You shouldn't concern yourself with the old one. The younger ones taste better.*

He managed to move his knees under him, struggling to stand up to face his wife's other self. The wolf roared at him as its thick saliva landed on his face and body. "You don't want to do this, Becs," he blurted, slurring his words. The werewolf lifted the dinner table with its massive hands and threw it at Calvin. It flew over his head, crashing against the sliding window, causing the glass to shatter. The wolf came down off its hind legs onto all fours, shifting its ears, listening to Ryan's voice coming from nearby.

The three Hatcher children made their way towards Layla's room. Before Devin could move inside, Ryan yelled, "No! Down the stairs, into dad's office!" Ryan struggled to remember what came afterward from the black pages he viewed with Layla, doubting his memory. Devin carried Layla down the stairs, ready to open the front door. As Ryan ran down, he looked back to see spirits, a girl in the pink dress and the balding man in a suit, looking down at them. He then turned his head to see Devin turning the knob to the front door, the middle of the split level house.

"No! Go to the office!" Ryan screamed again. Devin looked over Ryan's head to find their mother, the werewolf, looking down upon them, shaking its rear, readying to attack. "Come on!" Ryan continued, knowing his brother was staring at the new body their mother took. He pulled Devin by the shirt, forcing him to descend the second flight of stairs.

It threw itself towards them, colliding headfirst, crashing into their front door, creating a massive dent in the wood, shattering the glass above. It shook its head, regaining its focus to hunt the children. They burst into the laundry room, then their dad's office as Ryan slammed the door to each one, locking it behind them.

They had bought some time, but not much.

The wolf began scraping through the laundry door, slamming its body against it. It wouldn't be long before the monster would start breaking down the office door, so Ryan had to think quickly.

He began thinking about the front door, the warning on the paper, and the fallen dolls when Layla evaluated the path and how the dolls fell every time she failed. If Devin had continued to try to get out through the front, he

would have died—they all might have. *Can't think about that now!* “Layla, where do we go next? Do you remember?”

Layla with much determination, stopped crying to scan the room, finally pointing at the only window in the confined space. Ryan looked at the small rectangle shaped window, wondering if they could all fit through. He remembered a young man wearing a bloody letterman jacket lurking about—the thought of the poor student's insides sliding across the glass when he crawled past sickened him. But then the image of another Lite Brite page with three stick figures below a narrow opening appeared. “Okay, Layloo, let's get this thing open!” Their mother's brute strength had nearly destroyed the door to the laundry room, and she would soon break into the office and tear them apart.

“Are you sure?” Devin questioned, not realizing there was nowhere else to go now. The monster's bark grew louder and more intimidating as it grew frustrated.

“Yeah, this is it!”

“Then where?” Devin asked, unsure his brother knew what he was doing. Ryan flipped through those pages again in his head, and the only one he could recall was the one with the deck and the figures lying underneath it. “After this, we hide behind the hot tub under the deck. Got it?” Layla agreed, wiping away the snot from under her nose. Devin reached and unlatched the window that hadn't been open in years. “It's stuck!” he screamed, striking it with the side of his fist. A loud crash came from outside the office.

*She's gotten through the first door. You have to fight this, mom!* Ryan didn't know what to do for her. Talking to her wasn't helping. Rebecca had no control anymore.

With adrenaline coursing, Ryan hopped onto the desk and began to push the window open alongside his brother. Layla grasped the bottom of their jeans, watching the door splinter apart, listening to her mommy growl and bark. Layla couldn't understand why she wanted to hurt them.

The office window creaked open, Ryan and Devin exerted all their strength to widen the gap, desperate to create an avenue of escape. But their efforts were thwarted by the stubborn hinge, leaving the window stubbornly stuck halfway. Panic surged as they realized only one person could squeeze through.

"Layla, it's your turn! We need you to get outside," Devin urged, his voice strained with tension. "Once you're out, lift the window so we can follow. Do you understand?" he implored; his words punctuated by the thunderous growls of the approaching werewolf.

Glancing anxiously between her brothers and the front door, where the mucus coated covered snout of her transformed mother protruded through a small hole, Layla hesitated. Despite the danger, the sight of the canine nose evoked a sense of innocence and longing in her young heart.

Approaching the wolf cautiously, Layla reached out and tentatively placed her hand on its snout, her small fingers trembling. *Mommy just needs to be petted.* With childlike naivety, she began to stroke it gently, oblivious to the ferocity lurking behind the animal's facade.

The wolf calmed, and Rebecca watched her children from within the animal, hating herself for putting them through such fear and torment. *Maybe there is hope, after all,* Ryan thought to himself. All was tranquil for a few moments until Devin pushed the window out further, prompting the beast to snap at Layla's hand, who was quick to pull from its mouth. She ran over to Devin, allowing him to pick her up and put her through the window. She scooted from the opening to get onto her knees, staining her Rainbow Bright pajamas, and began to pull on the window with all her strength. The hinges creaked loudly, making all of them wince as Ryan was the next to escape from the office. The bottom of the office door had come apart, allowing the wolf to grasp it from underneath, lifting it, causing the hinges to tear off the splintered wood..

Devin stood face to face with the wolf, its gaze piercing through him. In those eyes, he could no longer see his mother. The realization dawned on him their plan to restrain the wolf, regardless of the shape it took, would have been ineffective. It was too intimidating, too powerful to be contained by mere restraints.

With Ryan's and Layla's help, they dragged their brother through just as the monster charged for him. *It should have been able to grab him. Something is holding it back,* Ryan thought. They dashed around the back corner of the house, their hearts pounding in their chests as they reached the deck, their designated hiding spot. Every footstep echoed loudly in their ears, a stark contrast to the silent terror gripping them. They bit down hard on their lips, fighting to stifle any involuntary shivers from the biting cold. Silence was their only ally now, their very survival hinging on it. Above

them, the wooden planks of the deck quivered, signaling the wolf's imminent arrival outside. *How? Dad must have escaped through the kitchen and didn't close the sliding glass door behind him*—was the only explanation Ryan could think of.

The beast descended the deck's stairs with calculated stealth, its movements silent and deliberate as it sniffed the air for their scent. Layla watched in fearful fascination as the wolf prowled around the side of the deck, drawing closer to their hiding place. She could see the steam of its breath in the chilly night air, evidence of its exhaustion from the relentless pursuit. Pausing in the grass, the wolf tended to its wounded paws, chewing away splinters and shards of glass from the debris left in its wake. With a renewed focus, it scanned the yard, its senses alert and honed.

Layla couldn't help but admire the beauty of the creature her mother had become in this form, noticing familiar features amidst the primal visage. Even as Ryan fought the urge to reveal himself, hoping for her to remain calm, he knew deep down the beast's instincts would always override any semblance of humanity.

The wolf shifted its giant body, its eyes fixated on the children, its predatory instincts kicking in. Layla's scream pierced the tense air as the beast bared its sharp teeth, poised to strike. A gunshot rang through the frigid night, drawing the creature's attention. Devin peered through the gaps in the wooden slats to see his father standing in the yard, brandishing a gun. Calvin lowered the barrel, signaling it was a warning shot to ward off the approaching danger.

"Come on, Rebecca. Come towards me. Come and get me!" his voice rang, pleading with his wife, hoping to break through to her and guide her from their children. But the wolf remained undeterred, ignoring his calls and fixating on the children once more.

"Stop it!" Calvin's voice cracked with desperation as he fired another shot. The bullet hit the ground beside the wolf, causing it to momentarily turn its gaze back to him. Growling fiercely, it showed its gleaming teeth, its hostility escalating with each step Calvin made towards it. As the beast hunched and let out a haunting howl, Calvin and the children were gripped with fear.

Unbeknownst to them, their mother fought against the curse with all her strength, holding back the beast within her. The howl was not a sign of aggression but rather the desperate frustration of Rebecca, struggling

against the relentless grip of the werewolf curse, fueled by the weakening of her body from the cancer.

As the wolf's mournful cry pierced the night, the Hatcher children, Ryan, Devin, and Layla, scrambled out from under the deck. They sprinted frantically across the narrow strip of lawn at the back of the house, racing towards the front yard where they hoped to find help. Their hurried footsteps, mingled with the rustling of dried leaves and the snap of twigs, reverberated through the stillness, unwittingly alerting the lurking werewolf.

The creature's watch shifted from Calvin to the fleeing children, a predatory gleam in its eyes as it made its decision. Ignoring the easier prey in front of it, the wolf turned its attention towards the rapidly vanishing figures of Ryan, Devin, and Layla. It understood the surest way to break Rebecca's resolve was to eliminate her children, and it wasted no time in pursuit.

"No!" Calvin told it, chasing it, "I'm here! Come after me! Leave them alone!"

Layla lagged behind her brothers, her heart pounding with fear as she glanced over her shoulder, desperate to gauge the distance between herself and the pursuing monster. Initially, she saw no sign of her mother's lupine form bounding after them. However, as they neared the street outside their home, Layla felt a sharp tug at the loose fabric of her sweater. The wolf was right on her heels, its hot breath sending shivers down her spine.

With dread showing through her tears running down her cold skin, Layla realized if she didn't act quickly, her own mother would become her killer, unable to resist the primal urge to attack and devour.

Taking a hard left, Layla managed to veer the hound off course, sliding in the grass, struggling to maintain its balance. The blue spruce tree was in front of her now, and all she would have to do was hide again, *maybe behind the big tree trunk*.

Ryan and Devin skidded to a halt, breathless, when they realized their mother wasn't pursuing them but instead had targeted their little sister. Calvin emerged from behind the house, his confusion evident as he scanned the scene unfolding before him. Spotting her father nearby, Layla came to a sudden stop in front of a spruce tree, urgently seeking his attention. She would run over to him because *if anyone could protect me, it's my daddy!*

It was too late.

Layla froze, her terror palpable as the werewolf leaped through the air, poised to strike her petite body. Her father and brothers shouted desperately, urging her to flee from the impending danger. Then, in a miraculous, an unseen force propelled her several feet forward, just as the wolf landed on the ground, bewildered and searching for its vanished prey. It was him—the *pusher*.

Ryan quickly realized everything unfolded according to plan. Layla was meant to halt in front of the tree. The lingering spirit had intervened, just as it had with previous victims, leading her from harm's reach. The victims of the werewolf's curse had orchestrated their actions meticulously. Yet, Ryan couldn't shake the feeling of unease, realizing he had no memory of Layla needing to be positioned in front of the spruce in her drawings. *Maybe she knew.*

The wolf loomed above Layla, who had collapsed onto the ground, poised for one final assault. Layla swiftly rolled onto her back and locked eyes with the towering beast, her mother's eyes staring back at her. In that moment, she yearned, clinging to the hope somewhere deep within the creature's ferocious exterior, her mother still existed.

*You need the food!*

*You let the human man hold you back.*

*You will see how the smallest are the most delicious.*

*No.....Not my Layloo.*

The werewolf paused.

It released a pained whine, the anguish evident in its eyes as the tension in its snarling features began to soften. In a fleeting moment, recognition passed between Layla and Rebecca, a glimpse of the loving mother buried within the wolf, but its inner turmoil surged forth once more, its growls and snarls signaling its readiness to strike one last time.

Calvin dashed forward, desperation driving him to reach out towards them, even as headlights abruptly bore down upon the scene. The wolf's eyes widened in dread as the oncoming truck approached, a harbinger of imminent danger. With a sickening thud, the vehicle collided with the werewolf's body, forcing it against the sturdy blue spruce tree in the Hachers' yard.

The impact shattered ribs and crushed the spine, pinning the creature in place. As the wolf let out pained yelps, its breaths growing shallow, it

realized the futility of resistance. Trapped and immobilized, it lay still, the realization sinking in that escape was hopeless.

The Hatchers stared at the yellow truck, devastated. A man emerged from the driver's side, clutching his head, sporting a large gash from the impact of colliding with the steering wheel upon hitting the wolf. Melvin Craggs, stepped in front of the headlight beams.

Calvin's eyes grew wide, rageful.

"What did you do?" he asked before screaming, "What did you do!" Calvin lunged at his neighbor, shoving the old man to the ground. He balled his fist, poised to assault, until Melvin, his eyes brimming with sorrow, rose and grasped Calvin's arms. With a depth of sincerity Calvin had never heard from him before, Melvin uttered, "It was the only way I could think of." Calvin recoiled, his desire to harm fading as Ryan and Devin rushed to the front of the truck, where their mother began reverting to her human body. "We need to move this truck!" Devin's voice cracked with urgency. But Melvin, shaking his head, knew it would only hasten her demise.

Despite the commotion, the neighborhood remained silent. Ryan observed only the billowing clouds of their breath and the dark expanse of the night sky. No one emerged from their homes, and no lights flickered on. With rumors of the festival and the recent attacks, the neighbors had chosen to keep to themselves. Perhaps they silently watched, opting to let things unfold without interference. After all that had occurred in the past month, maybe the neighbors could keep this secret, *no*, they will.

"We have to move it! Move the goddamn truck!" Ryan yelled.

"It's fine," a weak voice said. "It won't help." Rebecca lay naked across the hood, her head resting on the cool metal surface as the engine sputtered slowly to a stop. Blood trickled from her mouth, her arms hanging limp, partially immobilized from her shattered spine. She gazed at her home, memories flooding her mind of the laughter and love shared with her husband and children, a bittersweet comfort amid the agony of her torn body.

Melvin removed his coat, gently draping it over Rebecca's trembling body to shield her nudity. Turning to Layla, who remained frozen where she had fallen, he saw the shock etched on her face, the horror of witnessing her mother change back into a dying woman. With tender care, Melvin lifted Layla into his arms as she began to sob, her fingers gnawed raw with

anxiety, tears streaming down her cheeks and mingling with her running nose.

“Momma!” she shouted.

“It’s okay, baby girl. You shouldn’t have to see this,” Melvin murmured through his tears as he scooped Layla into his arms, shielding her from the heartbreaking scene. Layla stretched out her hand toward her mother as Melvin carried her away, guiding her to a safe distance where she wouldn’t witness the sight of her mother pinned against the tree, her body broken. With a weak wave of her finger, Rebecca managed to bid her daughter farewell, her gaze lingering on Layla for a moment before she disappeared from view behind the billowing exhaust smoke.

Ryan, attempting to ignore his sister’s sobs, tenderly stroked his mother’s head. “It’s ironic, yeah?” Rebecca whispered with a faint chuckle, “I thought it would be cancer that got me.” There was no laughter, but her attempt at humor brought a bittersweet warmth to the somber moment as they stood together, a family united in grief. “What can we do, Mom?” Ryan whispered softly, though deep within, he knew there was little they could do. Yet perhaps their presence and words could offer some solace to Rebecca in her final moments. After everything they had endured—the warnings, the nightmares, the haunting visions—it all seemed inconsequential now.

In the end, it was destined someone would endure pain, yet no one circling Rebecca Hatcher and her final breaths could ever believe it would be all of them—*not like this*.

Ryan failed to comprehend why the spirits had intervened to protect his friends but not his own family. Then, like a sudden revelation, he understood—the curse of the wolf needed to be broken to free the souls of the departed, allowing them to find peace. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect you, Mom,” Ryan sobbed, his voice thick with anguish.

His mother mustered the strength to move her left arm, reaching out to caress her son’s hair, a gesture reminiscent of their tender moments together when he was younger. “My brave boy, always trying to be the hero. But you don’t have to be. Just be good. That’s all I ever wanted,” she whispered softly.

“Tell us what we can do, Mom,” Devin interjected, his voice tinged with a mix of determination and grief.



Calvin leaned in close, pressing his lips against her forehead, his words barely audible as they quivered with emotion. “Is there anything you need?” he murmured, yearning to provide his beloved wife with some comfort.

Rebecca Hatcher mustered a gentle smile, her eyes shining with love for her boys. “Oh, there’s nothing I need... but if ya can, maybe keep meh in ya hearts... you know, from time to time. Okay, my loves?” she requested, her voice trailing off as she drifted into a final peaceful slumber.

“It will be. Every moment, Mom. I promise,” Ryan vowed, his voice choked with emotion as tears ran down his cheeks.

As their wife, mother—and *friend*, passed away, snowflakes began to descend from the sky, as if nature itself was marking the end of the wolf's curse. Layla gazed up at the falling snow, feeling her mother's presence in the gentle flakes. Tears streamed down her cheeks, mingling with the melting snow beneath her.

In her grief, Layla wondered if Anna, the girl in the pink dress, and the other spirits had finally found peace and knew where to go. As she looked up at the cold night sky, she felt a sense of connection to her mother and the departed souls.

Unbeknownst to them, the souls of the wolf's victims stood silently in the woods behind them, watching over their saviors. With the curse broken, they were finally released from their purgatory, free to move on to whatever awaited them next. As the Hatcher children wept for their mother, the spirits silently departed, their whispers of gratitude lost in the night.

Melvin backed his truck, allowing Rebecca's body to gently slide onto the ground. In a somber silence, Devin fetched clothes for his mother while Calvin tenderly carried her fragile body inside, laying her on a blanket. Together, they dressed her before calling for an ambulance, fabricating a hit-and-run story to explain her injuries. Melvin, leveraging a favor owed to him, arranged for his truck to be disposed of at a local scrap yard, ensuring it would be crushed into anonymity, concealing the truth of what happened that night. The pact they formed bound them together in secrecy for the rest of their lives.

After the ambulance departed with his mother, Ryan retreated to his room without a word to his family. He offered his sister a silent embrace, assuring her it would be alright. In the solitude of his bedroom, he found a sense of peace he hadn't felt since his mother's diagnosis. As he drifted into

sleep, as if there was nothing left to worry about, and it would be one of his best nights of sleep in weeks—finally.

Reflecting on the events of the night, Ryan found solace in the fact none of them had resorted to violence. They could have used the gun, the bat, or any means necessary, but they chose not to. It wasn't much, but it was a small comfort to cling to as he grew older. Looking back, he understood the spirits lingering around their home had guided them, even if their guidance came with sacrifice and sorrow.

*That has to be good enough.*



# EPILOGUE

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# PICTURES OF YOU

It was Christmas Eve, and the Hatchers and Donovans were gathered under one roof, sharing the warmth of the holiday spirit. Silvia Donovan had a brilliant idea the previous week and reached out to Calvin to discuss it. Together, they decided their two families shouldn't spend the holidays alone. Calvin then suggested to Ryan that they extend the invitation to Christina and her family. Ryan happily obliged, eager to see his girlfriend and Scott's best friend, knowing Devin would be equally pleased with Valerie's company. However, when Ryan invited Colin, he respectfully declined, opting to spend the holiday with his own family.

Though disappointed, no one would dispute Colin's sentiment.

Christina's relationship with her parents showed signs of improvement. They made plans for her and Ryan to stay with them for the latter part of the holiday break, a step towards reconciliation which should have happened long ago. It wasn't perfect, but it was progress.

As for Rick Donovan, he didn't undergo the change into a werewolf Ryan feared. He had only been scratched. However, Silvia had finally reached her breaking point after months of abuse, and she kicked him out of the house. Rick now lives near Cleveland, working to rebuild his life. Silvia made it clear he could return one day, but she doubted he would ever be the man she married.

Remarkably, Scott and Valerie seemed to be coping well with their parents' separation. With their father out of the picture, they found a new sense of peace and began to communicate with each other in a way resembling family. They now spent every other weekend with their father, gradually increasing the duration of their visits as Silvia grew more comfortable with the arrangement. When Rick protested, Silvia stood her ground, asserting. Valerie couldn't help but feel proud of her mother's strength and resilience.

The voices of the people speaking behind Ryan faded as he stared at the new shed in the back. All this time, he wondered what the point of rebuilding the shed was about and why it was so damn important. Ryan thought it would be where their father would have kept their mother trapped

during the full moon, but it wasn't. Devin was tired of wondering, so, acting nonchalantly, he turned around to smile at everyone he passed to his parent's room.

Making sure no one was looking, Devin took his father's keys from the dresser and proceeded to walk down to the garage. When his foot met the last step on the staircase, he looked up to find Ryan staring at him. "Where are you going?"

"I was just going to get some fresh air," Devin mumbled, knowing there was no talking his way out of this one. Unfortunately, his brother was too smart for his own good.

"Let me ask that in another way...Where are you going—really?"

Devin looked away and sighed, "Aren't you curious about the shed and what's in it?"

Ryan's eyes grew wide, excited he wasn't the only one whose curiosity was high. "Hold on for a sec. I'll go with you!" Ryan calmly walked to his room, hoping not to get the attention of anyone. He met Devin in the garage, and they trekked through six inches of snow outside from the driveway to the far end of the yard.

Devin pulled out his father's keys, fumbling through them, trying to find the one to the padlock. Ryan played lookout for him as he felt his way through the key ring. Finally, Devin found the matching key with the name of the padlock etched into it. "I think this is it, Ryan!"

They swung both doors open, pulled the light chain, and found the last thing they thought they would ever see. Devin covered his mouth, shocked, as Ryan walked in behind. Boxes lined the walls, wrapped in colored, decorated paper printed with holiday and birthday designs.

*They're presents. All of them are.*

Fencing had been installed by their dad, protecting the gifts from others, including snooping kids. The insulation helped keep the inside from being too cold or hot, protecting the presents from outside elements. Devin and Ryan walked along opposite sides of the shed. Tags were placed on each offering, indicating if they were for Christmas or birthdays, who they were for, and what age, or year, they should open them. Layla had the most out of all the siblings since she was the youngest.

Devin, taken aback by it, failed to notice the '53 Model 20 500 Melvin Craggs owned. It was his now. Rebecca had bought it from Melvin without anyone knowing except for their dad. The tag on it read, For Devin on his

18th Birthday. It was too much to take, so much to bear. Ryan tried to keep it all bottled as he backed away towards the doors, wanting not to see it all, not needing another reminder their mother was gone.

They walked away towards the open doors together, wanting not to sob so they could go back to the party without looking as if they had been weeping. A pair of arms came from the darkness behind them, bringing the brothers together. They looked back and saw their dad's face between theirs. "I figured you would let the curiosity take over," Calvin chuckled, biting his bottom lip. He wasn't mad at his boys. He wanted them to find out, so he didn't have to keep it secret for so long.

"How?" Ryan asked, wiping the tears from his face. Calvin chuckled and explained, "Your mom applied for a credit card and maxed it out because, as she put it, "What are they going to do? Come after me?" They all laughed because it was a thought their mother would certainly have.

"I miss her," Devin admitted. Calvin tightened his squeeze and told him, "I know you do. It was terrible what happened with her getting bitten, but maybe it's better to think of the curse as more of a blessing. It let her live longer than she should have. I don't know. Part of me thinks that, but the other wanted her to go in peace. Does that make me selfish?"

Ryan and Devin shook their heads. "Maybe the first way is the better way to think of it," Ryan told his dad, wondering if he was selfish. "I don't know either." Devin held his face in his hands, hating that he was crying in front of his brother and father. Calvin rubbed his back, breathed in heavy, and admitted something to his boys, becoming vulnerable—something they've never seen before. "They tell you at AA it's okay to be sad and cry when something bad happens, or someone you love goes away. There doesn't have to be shame in it. I wish I could have realized it sooner." They all stood in the cold, silent as they looked around the shed.

"Well, I can tell you she enjoyed your little day out with your friends last month. Maybe that made it worth it," Calvin told Ryan, bringing some levity to the moment, hoping he would feel better about everything for a moment at least. They stood and looked at the gifts before them, remembering Rebecca for the sweet and mouthy woman she was.

They wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Since we're here and it's Christmas Eve, maybe we take one present out tonight for all of us," Calvin insisted. "Really!" they said with nervous excitement. Calvin pointed to a rectangle box for one of them to grab. Ryan

grabbed it immediately and began to tear the red and gold wrapping paper off to reveal the Nintendo Entertainment System. It was the one thing he wanted, and his mother managed to obtain it. He didn't know it at the time, but another package he would find under the tree Christmas morning would have *The Legend of Zelda* in all its gold-plated glory, *Contra* and *Punch-out*, for all of his family and friends to enjoy.

Calvin didn't know it, but Layla followed him outside only to be distracted by the snow slowly falling around her. She played in it, throwing it into the air and making snowballs before deciding to wipe the snow off the swing attached to their gigantic tree in the backyard. Layla sat down and began to swing lightly, causing the snow on the branch above her to fall on her head. "That's cold!" she shouted at the tree. As she swung, Layla hummed a song as she stared into the woods in front of her.

The near bare bushes in the woods began shifting around, causing Layla concern. Something was rustling the leaves. Layla slid off the swing, ready to run. After the last couple of months, she was under the impression nothing good came from the woods—until something did. Layla heard a tiny mew in the distance. "Is that who I hope it is?" she whispered to herself with her mother's accent. A cat hopped out from the woods and meowed at Layla.

"Hi, kitty!" She hopped down from the swing to pick up a white cat. Layla noticed its feet were black, which meant only one thing. Layla turned the cat toward her to find a tag which read: "My name is Boots. Please go to the nearest animal shelter if you find me so I can go back home."

"But she doesn't have a home anymore. So the kitty can stay with me! I'll take care of it!"

Layla was thrilled to find the kitty cat she had been looking out for over the last two months. "Hi, Boots-Boots! I'm Layla, but you can call me Layloo." Layla examined the tag again, took off the collar, and told the feline, "She is going to be so relieved you're okay, Boots. You can stay with me if you want. Have to ask dad first, but I'm sure he'll say it's okay. We are a good family. You'll like it here!"

*Yes, we are. We are a great family.*

## THE END



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bryan Wayne Dull writes books, which makes perfect sense if you really knew him, and it's all he has done since sixth grade, spinning a yarn at a moment's notice. He is best known for writing horror and suspense stories. Solstice was his first novel and foray into publishing (it was a bet to do it), then its sequels. He lives in Spartanburg, SC, with his wife and daughter and plans to write more stories with something to say in this strange world we live in.

# OTHER WORKS BY BRYAN WAYNE DULL

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Ecliptic  
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