

WINK OF NIGHTMARES

BOOK OF SCREAMS
vol. 3

JEFF SZPIRGLAS
illustrated by
ANDREW P. BARR



IT'S TANYA'S LAST CHANCE TO SAVE THE WORLD...

In this final installment in the Book of Screams series, Tanya and Niah lure writer Joel Southland to a local coffee shop to find out his scheme. But soon customers are collapsing around them, lulled into an unnatural sleep—Southland's (and the evil ink's) doing. When Southland needs Tanya's help to draw the ink back to its origins, it seems like her only option. The ink is cunning and it will take all of Tanya's smarts to try to trap it...or else she might be trapped herself.

Woven into the main story are other nightmares the ink has been collecting, including a boy haunted by the long hair clogging a drain, two friends hoping to get famous by livestreaming their hot-pepper-eating challenge, and Gory Gary, a gruesome ghoul who pops up instead of Bloody Mary. It's a mix of frights, chills and laughs, perfect for middle-grade readers.



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BOOK OF
SCREAMS
vol. 3

INK OF NIGHTMARES

AUTHOR: JEFF SZPIRGLAS
ILLUSTRATOR: ANDREW P. BARR

September 16, 2025

This third and final installment in the Book of Screams series includes stories about a child who finds a cell phone that traps him in time, a monster fish disguised as a parent, and Gary Gary, who materializes instead of Bloody Mary. Finally, it's up to Tanya to stop the evil ink before it conquers the world!

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KEY SELLING POINTS

- In this last installment of the Book of Screams series, Tanya has one final chance to trap the evil ink—unless it traps her first. Other stories include two friends going too far for internet fame, a boy whose count to infinity renders him all-powerful, and a bored ghoul visiting the mall.
- This final book in the trilogy gives us a fitting finale to the ongoing Tanya story—the stakes are bigger and no one (even Tanya) is safe.
- Andrew P. Barr has provided spine-chilling illustrations, one to accompany each story.
- The first book in the series, *Book of Screams*, is a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection and a nominee for the BC Young Readers' Choice Awards in the Red Cedar category and the Forest of Reading Red Maple Award.
- Jeff Szpirglas is a horror aficionado and middle-grade teacher known for his creepy middle-grade reads, including *Tales from the Fringes of Fear*, *Tales from Beyond the Brain* and the Countdown to Danger series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIELLE SAINT-ONGE



JEFF SZPIRGLAS is the author of several works for young people, including the horror collections *Book of Screams*, *Pages of Doom*, *Tales from Beyond the Brain* and *Tales from the Fringes of Fear*. He is also the co-author, with Danielle Saint-Onge, of a number of Orca Echoes titles, including *Super Switch* and *Shark Bait!*. Jeff has worked at CTV and was an editor at *Chirp*, *Chickadee* and *Owl* magazines. In his spare time, he teaches grade school. Jeff lives with his family in Kitchener, Ontario.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



ANDREW P. BARR is an illustrator whose work has appeared in magazines, newspapers and movies, as well as on movie posters and T-shirts. In 2022 the book *Wild Outside*, which he illustrated, won the Yellow Cedar Award and the Children's Literature Roundtables of Canada's Information Book Award. Andrew lives in Oakville, Ontario.

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*—Kirkus Reviews,
Praise for Book of Screams*

"Fraught with monstrous danger... Readers will be suitably disturbed. More unnerving, nightmarish fare."

*—Kirkus Reviews,
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BEWARE THE HIDDEN
CHAPTER



INK OF NIGHTMARES

BOOK OF SCREAMS, VOL. 3

JEFF SZPIRGLAS

illustrated by
ANDREW P. BARR

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

For Danielle, Léo, Ruby and Gory Gary —J.S.

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WELCOME TO INFINITY



“There.” Marc smiled, punching the air in triumph as he paced down the sidewalk. “I *did* it!”

Abdul raised his eyebrows. “What did you do?”

“I counted to infinity. Phew. That was *not* easy.”

“Are you kidding me?” Why was Marc always such an oddball?

“No, I really did it. And in my head too.”

“You counted to infinity? In your head?”

“Well, *mostly*. There were a few times I had to count out loud and make some notes. It’s not an easy number to get to, and I didn’t want to lose my place. I think I might even be the first person to have reached it.”

“At the age of twelve,” Abdul added. He shook his head.

“Oh yeah,” Marc said, flexing his muscles. “*Infinity*.”

Abdul crossed his arms. “So tell me, brainiac. What happens when you get to infinity plus one, because there’s always a *plus one*?”

Marc barked a laugh. “Oh, I cracked the code to that problem. There’s an algorithm you just plug in to account for the fact that infinity goes on, well...”

“Forever,” Abdul said.

Marc nodded. “I must admit, I’ve been working at counting to infinity in my spare time for a while now.” He started cutting across the street, which was normally busy with cars, but he seemed indifferent to them.

Abdul hesitated, only following when he noticed that the cars had slowed to a crawl to let Marc across—as if they’d expected it.

“What, like after your homework?” Abdul asked when he’d caught up with Marc.

“After homework. Before school. Even at recess when you and Mike were busy playing soccer.”

“Uh-huh,” Abdul said. “I was wondering what you were doing pacing around the schoolyard like a goofball.”

Marc waved Abdul off. “I even put aside video games for a while too. They’d only distract me.”

Abdul let out a chuckle. “Nice joke, man. But can we talk about something else now?”

Marc frowned. “You mean you *don’t* want to discuss the infinite?”

“No, but come on, Marc,” Abdul said with a sigh. “Enough’s enough. I get the joke.”

“It’s not a joke.”

“Of course it’s a joke.” Abdul was growing more impatient by the second. With Marc, it was easy to be impatient. He didn’t always know when to let things go. “You can’t count to infinity.”

Marc shrugged. “Not without putting a lot of effort into it, no.”

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE!” Abdul shouted, and then huffed for breath. He realized he was clenching his fists and that his face was contorting in frustration. He tried inhaling deeply to calm himself.

Marc put his arm around Abdul. “Don’t worry about it. It’s only natural for you to feel unequipped to deal with this kind of reality-bending feat. Heck, you might even still think you’re standing here on the sidewalk with me.”

Abdul pushed Marc aside and pointed to the scene around them. “That’s because we *are* on the sidewalk. Outside the convenience store, I might add.”

“It certainly *resembles* a convenience store,” Marc said, gesturing to the building.

Abdul rolled his eyes. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to go inside it and order myself a slushy. See you later, Marc.”

With that Abdul walked ahead of Marc, opened the door of the store, and—

“Hey, Abdul! Hold up a sec, there.”

Abdul turned around and found that he wasn’t staring *back* at Marc, as he should have been. Marc was beside him.

In fact, Abdul saw that he was nowhere near the convenience store. He was back where he had been, right beside

Marc on the sidewalk. He hadn't moved anywhere near that store. He blinked and then shook his head. "Whoa, what just happened?"

Marc moved in closer. He smiled. "You're beginning to see it now, aren't you?"

"See what?" Abdul didn't understand any of this.

"Well, when you get to infinity, you get the *power*. That's the reward, right?" Marc put a hand on his shoulder.

Abdul didn't say anything. He moved away from Marc, who was starting to seriously weird him out now. Marc weirded *everyone* out. That was why he didn't have any friends except for Abdul. The truth was, Abdul was only friends with Marc because their moms worked together and hung out all the time, and they dragged Abdul and Marc along with them.

Abdul took a few steps toward the convenience store.

Because Marc was wrong. The store *was* there. The little blip in reality was just Marc's way of getting into Abdul's head, like he tried to do with everyone at school. The way he poked and prodded his way into conversations, never minding his own business, always trying to make friends and never knowing how. Heck, even when he tried to insert himself into Abdul's group of soccer buddies at recess, Marc never played by the rules. He always took the ball and started hoofing it down the sideline and getting everyone annoyed.

Abdul opened the door to the convenience store.

Only he was right back by Marc's side again, as if he'd never even left.

Abdul staggered back, looking around. There he and Marc were, on the sidewalk right at the edge of the convenience-store

parking lot. *Again*. Cars drove past on the road. Birds chirped in the trees. Other people were milling around on the sidewalk. Everything seemed so normal.

“See what I mean?” Marc said casually, as if instantaneously pulling his friend back to his portion of the sidewalk was as easy as snapping his fingers. “With infinity comes power.”

“What are you doing to me?”

Marc leaned in closer. “And when you have power, people will respect you.”

Abdul shifted his weight from foot to foot, his eyes darting around for an exit or escape.

“You don’t have to lie to me,” Marc continued. “I know what people think about me. I know what they say. They think I’m a weirdo, don’t they?”

Abdul shook his head. “N-no...”

“Sure they do. They avoid me. So do the teachers. They don’t like to call on me when I raise my hand in class. Well, that won’t be happening anymore. Check *this* out.”

Then Marc shifted his glance from Abdul to the people on the street. They all raised their right hands into the air. None of them looked Abdul’s way. They kept doing whatever they’d been doing but with their right hands firmly in the air, whether holding cell phones or coffee cups. Even drivers in their cars, some of whom had been driving with only the right hand on the wheel, raised their hands.

Marc watched as one of the cars veered off the street, knocked over a fire hydrant, sending a geyser of water spraying into the air, and crashed into a tree. The loud sound of a horn blared, unbroken.

The driver did not exit the vehicle.

Nobody responded to the accident. People were too busy walking along with their right hands in the air.

“I want to go home,” Abdul said.

“Don’t be scared,” Marc replied.

Abdul shook his head. “I’m not scared.”

“I mean, it’s okay to be scared, but don’t worry. You’re going to be okay.”

Abdul gulped.

“Because you’re my friend, aren’t you?” Marc asked.

Abdul didn’t say anything.

“My best friend,” Marc said, eyes growing wider.

“Yes,” Abdul managed, shaking himself out of the horror that was setting in. “Best friend.”

“And friends share everything, forever, don’t they? Like the secret to infinity.”

Abdul backed up. “It’s okay. I don’t need it.”

Marc tilted his head. “Sure you do.”

“I don’t want it, Marc.”

Marc shrugged. “But I’m going to be *bored* here, all by myself. Trust me. You’re going to love it.”

Abdul looked for a way out. Could he run away from Marc? Out of his reach? How far away were all those people with their hands up? Could he escape from Marc’s radius of power in time? He was faster than Marc, that was for sure. But fast enough?

“There’s only one way out of this, I’m afraid,” Marc said. “But you’re not going to like it.”

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Abdul backed away. Of course, he couldn't really. At least, not from Marc. Marc could be everywhere, Abdul realized. At any time.

He met Marc's gaze. "What do you want me to do?"

"Simple," Marc said, his eyes gleaming with a kind of mania. "You just need to count, for a really, really long time."

Abdul shook his head.

"Come on, you can do it."

"No." Abdul shook his head again. He could feel himself starting to shiver.

"Here, we'll start together," Marc said in a singsong tone. "Come on, Abdul. You're my best friend. Friends until the end, right?"

"Please, Marc. Stop it! Stop it!"

"One..."

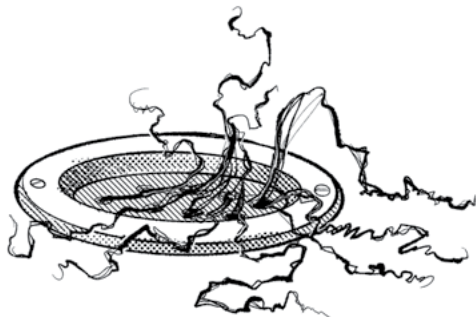
Abdul turned. He bolted, sprinting as fast as he could.

"Two..."

Only there he was, back at Marc's side again.

"Three..."

FROM THE DRAIN



I first noticed it after brushing my teeth. There was something in the drain. The suds weren't going down like usual—the drain was blocked again. Hopefully it wasn't the gum I'd spit out in there a few days earlier. Anyway, I'd clogged it before, so I knew the drill.

I poked a cotton swab into the drain, under the stopper, and twirled it around, pulling out a thick clump of gelatinous goop. It was dark and had a rancid smell that would normally be disgusting. But I felt a sense of victory having successfully cleared the blockage. I threw the blob into the trash and turned the tap back on, waiting for the water to flush away my used toothpaste. But water just filled the sink again.

I cranked the tap off and waited. As the water level slowly lowered, I spied a dark hair curling out of the drain.

Aha. This was solvable! My fingers were small enough to dig into the gap under the metal stopper. Using my index finger and thumb as tweezers, I pulled on the hair. It resisted at first but then slowly yielded to my efforts. I tugged it toward me, slowly, gently, so it wouldn't break. The hair was long and dark. It must have been my mother's, since she had the longest hair of anyone in the house.

But by the time I'd pulled my hand back, I could see the hair was actually too long and too dark to be hers. This hair was black (hers was brown), and when it finally popped out, the thick strand stuck to the sink like a worm. I did a mental check of all the people who had been through our place in the last several weeks and came up short.

I stared at the hair for a moment before a wave of revulsion hit me. Then I grabbed it with a wad of toilet paper and threw it in the trash. Yech. I washed my hands thoroughly.

Random slimy drain hair—super gross! But I'd triumphed.

I twisted the tap back on to flush the spit-out toothpaste down. Finally the sink drained perfectly!

I gave the mystery hair no further attention. At least, not until a week later, after swimming lessons at the community center.

The rule was you had to shower after using the pool to rinse off all the pungent chlorine they dumped into it. Most of the kids in my swim class gave themselves a quick half-hearted splash and got dressed, but I'd never hear the end of it from my mom unless I'd thoroughly washed my body and lathered my hair.

It meant that I was always the last kid out of the showers, the last kid to get changed and the last kid to get home to more pressing matters, like video games.

Still, the shower was warm, and I had it all to myself. I stood there and let the strong jet of water massage my back. The quiet was nice. Maybe a few of the guys were toweling down and getting changed, but that was in a different part of the changeroom.

The heat from the shower was so lulling that I'd kind of zoned out before I noticed the water level rising.

I looked down. The water was already up to my ankles, not going down the drain like it should have been.

I turned around, wrenched the taps off and searched the familiar whirlpool of shampoo bubbles by the drain.

I stopped. Even through the film of shampoo on the surface, I could see it. Strands of hair had pushed through the patterned holes in the drain and were swishing to and fro in the water.

For some reason, I knew it was the same black hair as from my sink the previous week—I could feel it in my gut—only now there were hundreds of strands. They stretched across the floor, moving like the tentacles of an octopus or squid, in all directions at once, defying the currents caused by my nervous footsteps.

I backed away slowly, deliberately planting my feet so that I didn't slip and fall.

The hair must have followed me to the community center. It had known, or anticipated, my movements and had followed me as if I were prey. I shuddered.

I kept backing away, stepping out of the shower stall and into the changeroom—empty now, as usual—until I felt the cold metal of a row of lockers press into my back.

“What do you want?!” I shouted at the hair.

The hair halted its approach and wavered there, as if responding or at least listening. Could it hear me? Could it understand?

“Leave me alone,” I said, my voice shaking.

The hair had stretched out to a length of at least two feet, long enough to reach from a scalp to the small of someone’s back. From the drain came a resonant *glug*. Bubbles gurgled up, and the water started to flow back down—but the hair stayed.

I stood there, transfixed, feeling the water pull away from my feet. Finally the water fully emptied, leaving behind a series of wet, unmoving clumps of hair.

I wanted to run, but I stood my ground. Another sound gurgled up from the drain, only this time there was no liquid that spewed forward.

“G-G-G-G-G...”

It was a voice. A deep, guttural vocalization that was barely audible, but the tiled walls amplified the sound. A hard, glottal *G*, like something was stuck at the back of someone’s throat and trying to punch its way through.

“G-G-G-G-G...”

“Oh great,” came a man’s voice. I turned to see the caretaker standing by the changeroom door, mop jammed into one of those yellow buckets on rollers. He must have come in to clean up while I was in the shower. He was staring at

the mess on the floor and shaking his head. “What did you shove down there, kid? One of those Halloween wigs from the dollar store?”

“Stay away from it,” I urged him.

The caretaker snorted. “Yeah yeah. It’s better than cleaning up puke from the pool. That was last week’s headache.” He pushed past me, and I tried to grab him, but he already had the mop out, swirling it across the dirty tiles with the efficiency of a machine.

He’d only just touched the hair with the mop when the hair reacted. I couldn’t even tell that it had at first, except for the blur and the scream. My scream, as it turned out. The caretaker didn’t even have a chance to make a sound, because the hair was wrapped around his neck and then in his mouth, pushing its way down. I heard him gurgle and sputter.

The mop clattered to the tiled floor as the man coughed and choked, the hair pushing itself down his throat. I could only stand and watch as he gagged and bent over to retch, but nothing came. He stood over the drain, opening and closing his mouth like a fish gasping in the air. His face was red and puffy, and his eyes were wide and staring...until, finally, they settled their gaze on me.

The man saw that I was still watching, and then his look changed. “G-G-G-G-G...” he said.

I gasped, backed away, then grabbed my things from my locker and ran.

My mom was not impressed at the way I exploded out of the changeroom in my bathing suit. “What is going on? Why aren’t you dressed? And why didn’t you dry off?”



Already I was causing a scene, waving my hands around frantically and trying to make some kind of sense of it all. But it could never make sense. “The hair! It attacked the caretaker and he ate it, but he didn’t want to, and—”

She wrinkled her nose. “What hair?”

I turned and pointed at the changeroom just as the caretaker came out. He stopped and looked at us. “Him,” I said, pointing a shaking finger his way. “It was him. The hair attacked *him*.”

The caretaker gave my mom a curious look, and I turned to see a similar look of confusion on her face. Then I heard the caretaker chuckle, his tummy shaking, and he threw his head back, which was enough to cut the tension that had filled the room.

Other people began to laugh as well—the guy behind the glass booth where people came into the pool and paid for their swim, and the other kids and their parents, who had no idea what to make of my freak-out.

The caretaker wheeled his mop down the hall, away from us, and I realized he hadn’t said a word.

Was I imagining it all?

“You don’t need to get our attention that way,” my mom said in the car on the way back home.

“I wasn’t trying to get your attention,” I said uncertainly, still trying to piece it all together. “That guy got attacked.”

“He did not.”

“He was attacked by the same hair that I found in our drain,” I stated, as much for me as for her.

My mom responded, but I wasn't paying attention. I was talking it all out for myself, trying to figure out what it meant.

What the hair *wanted*.

I didn't use the bathroom sink that night. Didn't trust it.

"But you have to brush your teeth," my dad informed me. "We all do before we go to bed. Or else the plaque builds up. The germs will eat away at your enamel. You don't want cavities, do you?"

"I don't want to brush my teeth," I said quietly, so no one else could hear. Not Mom or Dad. Not my older brother, Dennis, who was always looking for some reason to kick my butt anyway.

I caved eventually, but I brushed in the hall, only returning to the bathroom sink when I could see that Dennis was getting annoyed waiting for his turn. "Just get on with it, dweeb," he snapped, then flicked my neck with his fingers.

I rinsed and spat, thinking that if anything happened, he would see it too.

I watched the toothpaste spiral down into the drain, heard the liquid gurgle coming up from the sink. I waited.

But there was no hair and no sign of anything else.

Like it knew I wasn't alone.

But I hadn't been alone in the shower. The caretaker had been there, and look what had happened to him.

I could hardly think about anything beyond trying to avoid any sink in sight. The next morning, when it was my turn to clear the dishes, I stood above the piled-up plates and bowls and shivered, fearing what lurked in wait below.

School, at least, was a crowded place where someone would always be within eye or earshot in case I ran into trouble.

The only problem was, I was still going to have to go to the bathroom at some point. I'd been holding things in all morning, afraid to venture into the washroom alone, and it had reached the point by third period where release was imminent, whether I liked it or not.

Needless to say, I excused myself and dashed to the washroom, hoping there would be someone else there in case the hair decided to show itself.

But the washroom was empty. I kicked open a stall door, searching for any sign of the hair, and, once satisfied, took care of business quickly.

Heart hammering in my chest, I flushed the toilet and braced for the inevitable sound. I didn't know what kind of people had designed the school toilets, but the flushes were louder than the fire alarm (I say this as the kid who missed a fire alarm in second grade while flushing a toilet).

And, sure enough, the toilet let out a gurgling howl that could shake dust from the ceiling tiles.

As I pushed out of the stall, I heard something bubbling behind me. I turned and looked and—

“No.”

But it was there, flowing up from the hole at the bottom of the gleaming white bowl, floating in the water.

The water level rose quickly, spilling over the rim and flowing across the floor as I jumped out of its way. The water coursed toward me. Some of it got channeled down the floor

drain, but the rest kept coming—and within it, black and long and clumping, was the hair.

A few days earlier it had been just a wisp or two in the drain. Then clumps at the pool. Now it had grown again.

There was no person with hair that long, not that I'd ever seen. I was ten paces back, against the wall, and the water was nearly at my shoes, bringing the hair with it.

The long black hair didn't seem to have a beginning or an end, really. It just pulsed out of the toilet in thick, wet knots, moving with the water—controlling it, even—probing this way and that way like the tentacles of a sea creature.

Then, coming from behind me, I heard squealing metal, wheels against tile, and boots thumping.

The noise shook me out of my trance, and I turned and tensed my muscles to run. I did run, but I bumped into somebody standing in the doorway.

Somebody tall, wearing thick denim and smelling of chlorine.

It should have been Mr. Fretz, our school caretaker. He'd been here that morning. I'd seen him sweeping in the hallway and emptying classroom garbage cans into the bin of his large trolley. But it was someone else looming there, blocking anyone from getting in and out.

It was the caretaker from the swimming pool.

I'd seen the hair go into his mouth, into his body, and now he was here, and more hair was moving across the floor.

I felt the cold water from the toilet start to seep through the fabric of my shoes and socks, and when I shifted my weight, my feet squished against the soles like sponges.

I had to get out of the washroom somehow, get help, warn people, but the caretaker still stood there, looking down at me.

“What is it?” I asked him. “What do you want?”

He opened his mouth, and the sound bubbled out of his throat.

“G-G-G-G-G...”

The hairs pushed out between his open lips. They tickled their way out of his throat, probing the air as if in a breeze. Only there was no breeze.

This was that moment where I had to either let the fear seize me or do something. The hair was after me. No doubt about it. “What do you want?!” I demanded.

“HERE!” the caretaker half bellowed, half gagged. “You dropped THIS!”

Out of his mouth, on the undulating web of soaked hair, came a small white object. Either it was clinging to the hair or the hair was clinging to it, and I could see the caretaker’s eyes widen in frustration. He let out another loud, grating howl that rattled the flimsy metal toilet stalls.

He jerked his hand up to his mouth. The fingers quickly disappeared into the beard-like tangle of hair hanging from his lips, and I heard a short, sharp tearing sound. Then the fingers reemerged, the thumb and forefinger proffering the pale, misshapen orb as if it were a pearl extracted from an oyster. “TAKE IT BACK! YOU HAVE CAUSED US A GREAT DEAL OF DISCOMFORT!”

I held my hand out, and the fingers dropped the item into my shaking, sweating palm.

“Wha—what is it?” I whimpered.

So many broken strands of hair were stuck to it that I could barely make it out. The caretaker coughed out the word just as I realized what it was.

“G-G-G-G-G-G-GUM!”



part one

And there it was, printed, bound and dangerous.

Tanya stared at the book. She'd tried to keep the stories from getting out. She'd risked her life, but it hadn't even made a difference. Now all she could do was watch.

Even though she knew it was futile, Tanya reached out, wanting to knock this copy—all the copies—off the display. It would be the quickest way to get rid of them. And also the quickest way to get herself kicked out of the bookstore. Then where would she be?

"Excuse me," someone said from over her shoulder. Tanya turned to see a crowd of people gathering behind her. An older gentleman stood at the front, arms crossed, impatience forming crinkles at the corners of his eyes. "If you're only looking, I'd like to pick up a copy of that book."

Tanya let out a defeated huff of air and stepped aside. “It’s for my granddaughter,” he added, but the way the man picked it up and began to thumb through the pages then and there suggested it was actually for him.

There was no stopping it. This was just one of many similar displays in bookstores all across the country.

And the worst part? Tanya had actually given the book its title.

Pages of Doom, the front cover read, although the title was smaller than the name of the author, Joel Southland.

Tanya had once been a fan of his, but that felt like a lifetime ago. Southland’s tales were not merely scary stories. As Tanya had discovered, Southland’s talent had less to do with writing than it did with theft. But Southland didn’t steal money or even ideas. He stole dreams.

Of course, he’d had help. First Southland had used his fame to visit school after school, giving book talks, answering questions, autographing books and bookmarks.

Tanya had received one of these coveted signed bookmarks herself. The ink on that bookmark had come alive, swum up her arm and into her body, and extracted her most horrendous dream.

Tanya hadn’t known, at first, because the dream was missing from her memories. It was not until another one of Southland’s books went into print that the dream resurfaced on the pages. *Her* dream. And at the same time, Tanya began to hear a voice in her mind, sometimes overlapping like a chorus, coming from the ink itself. It wasn’t really ink, though. It was some kind of liquid organism that Southland had found at the bottom of a well where he’d once lived.

How long had it been there, lying dormant? Tanya had no idea. How did it work? Another mystery. She did know what it wanted, and that was to grow stronger. It fed on fear, and the fear from nightmares seemed to be the best fuel of all. The ink used people—first Southland, then her—to gather dreams and then spin them over and over, until the fear and the horror became even more concentrated.

For a while Tanya had thought she had control of the ink. She'd used it to exact revenge on Southland. Or so she'd thought.

But Joel and the ink had been conspiring together to steal the dreams Tanya had collected. She had tried to stop them by going straight to Southland's publisher. Tried to explain. It had done no good. The publisher was in on the whole scheme too. They'd even created a test copy of the book printed with the evil ink, which had attacked Tanya and Niah. Her only consolation was they at least hadn't printed all the books with it, as Tanya had worried they might—doing so would have distributed the ink all over the world. But this only meant that Joel Southland and the ink were planning something else. And she had no idea what.

Now she stood in front of the display in the bookstore. More and more people were clustered around it, grabbing or reading copies. There were so many books here, stacked in a pyramid on a circular table in the front lobby. There were copies in the windows and posters of it tacked to the walls. This was Southland's most popular book yet! And he hadn't even gathered these stories—*Tanya* had. They were refined, terrifying slices of pure fear. What would happen when these people read them? Would these stories elicit even more terrifying dreams in return?

JOEL SOUTHLAND and PAGES OF DOOM, the front covers of the books proclaimed. Oh, but if they only knew how true that was! The two O's in the last word seemed to resemble myriad pairs of eyes staring directly at her, and Tanya stepped back, bumping straight into—

“Geez, you’ve got heavy feet.”

Tanya jumped, but she knew the voice. She turned and shook her head. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Just trying to keep you on your toes and off mine,” Niah said. “Why are you tempting fate?”

“I wasn’t going to take the book,” Tanya said. She turned to the display. “Even if we read it, would it be able to affect us? We were the ones who gathered the stories in the first place.”

It was true. The one and only good thing that had come out of this whole business with Joel Southland and the ink was Niah. The two girls had been friends a long time back but had drifted apart. When Niah noticed that Tanya was up to something, she’d learned more and decided to help.

“We need to see if any of the stories have changed,” Tanya said. “Or if there are any in there we don’t know about.”

Niah shook her head. “We agreed we weren’t going to read the book. Southland must be expecting us to.”

Tanya shrugged. She was happier to not look at it anyway.

The girls turned to leave, only to come face-to-face with the man himself. Joel Southland. He stared at them, not blinking, a wide smile across his face.

Tanya screamed. Then Niah punched her in the shoulder.

“But—” And then Tanya saw. It was just a life-size promotional cutout of Southland to go with the display. It was still

wobbling slightly, and the two bookstore employees who had set it down regarded it, and the girls, with some degree of amusement.

Both of them were bearded young men wearing identical shirts that displayed the bookstore's name across their lapels. "It's eye-catching, right?" one said.

"Sorry to startle you," the other added.

Tanya rolled her eyes. "It's fine. You guys enjoy your Joel Southland books."



"Well, what did you expect?" Niah asked, when they were far enough away from the store that neither girl felt contaminated by Southland's book.

They were in a city park, and it was that time of year when summer shifted to fall, with some trees still a vibrant green and others already almost neon shades of yellow and orange. Tanya plopped down on a vacant park bench, Niah joining her. The cool winds and husk-dry leaves of late fall were yet to come, but even so Tanya felt a chill as she looked across the way to see a couple of kids sitting and reading.

What were they reading? *Pages of Doom*, by Joel Southland, of course. The covers leered at her, even from a distance.

Niah saw it too. "We'll find a way to stop him."

"It's not Joel Southland I'm worried about," Tanya said. "The ink is so strong. Can't you feel it?"

Both girls had been attacked by the ink before. Tanya knew that parts of it still lurked within them.

“We could try the police,” Niah suggested.

“Without any evidence?”

“If we can get some of that ink and show it to them—”

“The ink is smart,” Tanya interrupted. “It knows better than to reveal itself in front of the police. Not until it’s ready, that is.”

Niah pushed herself up off the bench. “Geez, Tanya. I’m just trying to help.” She paced away, putting distance between the two of them. Tanya felt a breeze blow against her skin, and she took a deep breath. Fighting wasn’t going to get them anywhere.

“I know that, Niah. I’m sorry,” Tanya said.

“It’s okay,” Niah muttered as Tanya got up to join her.

The girls walked. They made their way out of the park and over to the bus stop to wait for the ride home.

“Listen, I know it’s up to us,” Niah said. “But look at that book. It’s *everywhere*. It’s not like we just gather them up and bury them. There are hundreds of thousands out there, across the country. Stopping Joel Southland doesn’t stop the ink.”

“Not necessarily,” Tanya said. “But the fact is, we need him. The ink is plotting something, and he’s part of it. I thought the ink wanted me, but it just took the nightmares I gathered and—” She stopped. Her eyes went wide.

Niah shrugged. “What?”

Tanya had already pulled out her phone and was searching for a number.

Niah tried to see what Tanya was looking for. “You’ve got that look on your face that usually means trouble. What’s the plan?”

Tanya looked up from her phone, the corners of her mouth curling into a sly smile. “We say we have something Southland needs. To lure him to meet with us.”

Niah wrinkled her nose. “What could we have that he’s interested in?”

“A dream,” Tanya said quietly. “*His* dream.”

“But we don’t have one.”

“He won’t know that for sure,” Tanya said. “I had the ink for a while. I used it against him in the past. Who’s to say I didn’t copy down one of his nightmares and put it away for safekeeping, for a time like now? He knows we’re smart, that we might have planned another strategy.”

“Our strategy is a bluff,” Niah said, sounding unconvinced. “He’s got all the cards, Tanya. He’s got the ink on his side, he’s got the books out there. And supposing it works—what’s the point of meeting with him? We tried that before, and it didn’t turn out well.”

“But now we don’t have much to lose,” Tanya said.

Niah pulled the phone away from Tanya and stared at it. “This is only the phone number for his publisher’s office. You planning on just leaving a voice message with the receptionist?”

“They know who we are,” Tanya said. “They’ll respond.”

Niah sighed, then shrugged. “Fine. Where should we tell him to meet us?”

“Someplace we know well.”

“It can’t be school,” Niah said, thinking out loud. “They lock it up at night. And we need an after-school meeting. Someplace public. Someplace *safe*.”

Tanya snapped her fingers. “Your cousin Brad got a job, right? At the coffee shop.”

Niah rolled her eyes.

“What?”

“It’s just that, he’s kind of...well...*Brad*.”

“Niah, Brad has a car and a job *and* he’s easy to bribe.”

“Uhhh,” Niah said, which meant *yes, we can bring Brad into this, but don’t say I didn’t warn you*.

And then there was another loud groan—but this time it was just the bus pulling up to take the girls home.



Nothing much happened for the rest of the week, not until Tuesday after school when Tanya got home and let herself in. She was the first one there, and she got on with her routine of sorting the mail. Usually it was just junk and bills for her parents, but as she riffled through, Tanya spied an envelope with her name on it and no return address.

It wasn’t stamped, either.

She turned it over. There was nothing on the back to indicate who’d sent it.

Tanya held the envelope up to the light streaming in through the windows. There was a note in it—she could tell from barely visible dark lines across the paper within.

Before Tanya could process any further thoughts, the cell phone in her pocket buzzed. She put the envelope down on the side table, saw that the call was from Niah and answered. “Yo, what’s up?”

“Hey, I just got home, and there was, like, this thing in the mail.”

Tanya froze. She turned to the envelope. “What thing?”

“Like, a letter, Tanya. With my name on it. But no stamp, no nothing.”

Tanya understood. “We *both* got letters.”

“You did too?”

Tanya scanned her surroundings. “Are your parents there?”

“Nope. I just got home.”

Tanya swallowed. “Don’t open that letter, Niah.”

But before Tanya could put the phone down and leave, she heard Niah scream.

“It’s here!” Niah’s voice crackled over the phone. “It just jumped off the page!”

“Niah?!” Tanya cried.

More screams. Then the sound of something loud. A thud.

Tanya looked at her phone. They were still connected. She could hear something. A wet, liquid sound. The ink. It had reached Niah.

Tanya looked up from the phone and over at the table where she’d left the envelope. It was still there. Only now it was blank on the front.

Tanya felt her muscles seize. She slowly backed up to the door, feeling in her pocket for the keys. *Get out*, she told herself. *Go get help. Go get Niah.*

She could still hear the slurping sound.

But a quick glance confirmed Tanya’s suspicions: the call had ended. The sound was here.

The keys. They weren’t in her pocket. They were on the side table, in the key bowl. Beside the envelope.



WE HAVE
YOU NOW
TANYA

She cast a glance in front of her. No ink anywhere that she could see. She took a step forward. It would just take a quick swipe to grab the keys and then leave.

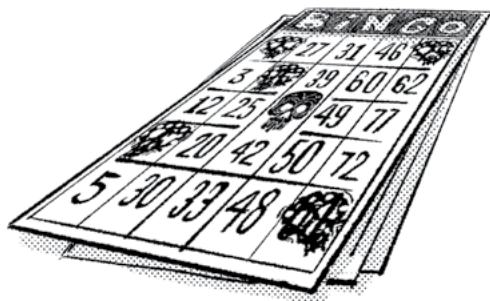
She looked the other way, spotted her reflection in the mirror and—

Letters. On the mirror. Black, inky and undulating.

WE HAVE YOU NOW, TANYA, they read.

Tanya tried to jump back, but the ink leapt from the mirror, letters blurring, and flew at her face.

BORED



Leo was bored.

Yes, bored.

There were many things Leo struggled with—solving multistep math problems, listening to instructions from an adult (parent or teacher), lifting the toilet seat lid—but boredom topped them all.

As far as Leo was concerned, there was only one solution, but he'd already used up his screen-time ration for the day and his parents had every device under lock and key.

He sat on the couch, staring at the wall and wishing it would turn into a set of pixels that he could control. But the wall just stood there, doing the uninteresting job of supporting the ceiling.

“Gah!” he snapped. And just for the heck of it, he picked up a pillow from the couch and threw it. The pillow hit the dog, who barked and ran out of the room.

Leo had already tried playing with the dog, whom he’d exhausted.

So he went on to play with his sister, Hazel, who was eighteen months older than him and happier to curl up on her bed with a book and the family cat than entertain her younger brother.

“I said, GET OUT!” Hazel growled.

“Come on, let’s play a game.”

“My game is called READING THIS BOOK!”

“IS YOUR GAME ALSO CALLED SHOUTING?”

“GAHHHH!” Hazel shouted, and she leapt off the bed and slammed the door in Leo’s face.

“You could have taken my finger off with that,” Leo said loudly.

But only silence responded.

Silence and boredom.

Boredom, boredom, boredom.

Leo thumped downstairs into the den where his father was reading a newspaper. He often put on his jazz records while he read, and Leo knew better than to thump around the record player—he might bump the needle and annoy his father.

Nevertheless...

“Stop bumping around the house,” his father said.

“I’m not bumping.”

“You’re looking for someone to play with, and we’re all happy doing our own thing.” He put down the paper and stared at his son. “Did you clean your room?”

“Yes,” Leo lied.

“Go and clean your room for real.”

“I did!” Leo protested, but in doing so he thumped his foot and made the record skip. Again.

“Go and jump on the trampoline in the backyard,” his father said.

“I don’t want to.”

“Leo, you’ve got to stop telling us how bored you are.”

“But I don’t know what to do!”

“Read a book.”

“I’ve read them all.”

“Go and play with your LEGO.”

“I did that already.”

“Just. Go,” his father said with a wavering tone that suggested he was trying very hard not to explode.

So Leo went.



He didn’t know exactly where to go, but strolling outside put Leo away from his family, who seemed annoyed with him.

Leo walked down the street and looked at the birds flitting from tree to tree. Boring. He looked at the cars parked in the driveways. Boring. He heard a helicopter flying overhead, probably checking for traffic, and that was boring too.

Nothing he saw caught his interest—until he turned toward one of the well-kept lawns and saw the box. It was nailed to the top of a post beside the sidewalk at the foot of a neighbor's lawn. The box was made of wood and had a glass panel at the front. Inside was a bunch of books. It was one of those little free-book boxes, where you could take a book or put in a book. Leo had never noticed it before. He wasn't sure if the box had been erected recently or if he just hadn't noticed on account of his incessant boredom.

Boredom. The word was in his mind, but it was also on the spine of one of the books, in big, bold letters.

There, beside *Stories to Melt Your Mind* and *Pages of Doom*, was *CURE FOR BOREDOM*.

Leo opened the hinged door to pull out the book.

Yes, he'd read the spine correctly. It was as if the book had been lying in wait just for him. It was old and creased, and it felt like it had been left in the dirt, or in a puddle, or at the bottom of a trash bin. Sure enough, when he lifted it closer to his face, he caught a whiff of "old-book smell," and he was tempted just to put it back or throw it across the street (Leo liked throwing things).

But instead he thumbed through the pages. More of the stale smell of old paper and mildew wafted up toward him, but a fresh sensation was coursing through him: curiosity. This feeling of sustained interest was stronger than his revulsion at the smell, and he scanned the pages, taking in the words.

The book was, Leo realized, a set of instructions. This dampened his initial enthusiasm somewhat. Too much like

rules he had to follow. Then again...a *cure* for boredom. It was tempting.

But where to begin? Each page of the book gave some suggestion, and a bunch of them sounded like advice his parents might give—do a puzzle, write a message in Morse code and send it, that sort of thing. He wondered if he could use the book somehow. Let the book decide what he should do instead of his family.

Let the book decide, Leo repeated in his mind.

Books didn't decide, but chance could. So Leo flipped through the pages once, twice, three times. As he fanned through the book, Leo jabbed the finger of his free hand down, stopping the pages. "Bingo," he said.

It wasn't just an expression. Leo looked and saw *Play a Game of Bingo*. There was some text below the bold heading, and although Leo skimmed through the words, there was no magical solution to boredom that he could find.

Bingo. The only place he'd ever seen the game played was at school, when his teacher had made the class play math bingo the previous year. But he knew there was a bingo hall in town.



He'd never been inside the bingo hall. It was in a strip mall with a crummy two-for-one pizza place, a convenience store and a couple of boarded-up shops. Leo ignored the bleak surroundings and stared through the dirty window at the interior. It wasn't much to look at. There were four or five

long wooden tables where a few older adults sat looking at cards and stamping them with daubers.

“Go play a game of bingo,” Leo said to himself, and he patted his backpack where the book lay. He didn’t actually have any interest in this idea—he was just following the book and seeing where it took him.

Leo pulled the glass door open and sidled into the hall. Even though there was a big No Smoking sign plastered to the wall, the place reeked of cigarettes. It was probably a better smell than the stale odor of “old people,” which he could also detect.

Well, Leo noted, that made sense. Nobody here looked to be under seventy. Not that he could discern the difference between old folks’ ages. They all looked the same to him.

The only real movement that caught his eye was a slightly-less-old person at the front of the hall, who was cranking a spherical cage full of little balls. He stopped, opened a small hinged door on the cage, dug his fist in and extracted one of the balls. “G-32,” he spoke into a microphone beside him, and his voice blared out of the speakers positioned around the room.

Leo turned to see a few of the old people take their daubers and mark their cards.

This was...well...boring.

Anyway, the book didn’t say to *watch* people play bingo. He had to actually play a game himself.

That meant walking to the back of the room where an old woman was sitting behind a counter reading a newspaper.

“How much to play?” Leo asked.

“You’re supposed to be over eighteen,” the woman said, staring at him.

Leo stood there, unsure what to do.

Eventually she shrugged. “Five bucks a game or three for ten,” she grumbled.

Leo dug around his pockets and fished out a folded five. “One game, please,” he said.

An exchange of papers took place, and Leo sat down at one of the tables, as far from the decrepit-looking players as he could.

When the next round started, Leo watched as the numbers and letters were called out. N-22, I-13, O-7, and so on.

It took a few calls before Leo saw the right combination on his card—and then he realized he had a problem: he didn’t have anything to mark it with. “Ack,” he said. He was pretty sure there were bingo daubers for sale there too, but before he could get up, he heard the squeak of one of the plastic chairs beside him as an old man sat down.

“Here,” the man said, offering him a dauber. “You can share mine.”

“Thanks,” Leo said somewhat apprehensively, taking the dauber to mark his card. “I’m Leo.”

“The name’s Stanley,” replied the man, and when Leo offered the dauber back, he could feel Stanley’s leathery hands fold around his own for a moment, the skin parched and brittle.

More letters and numbers were called. Stanley marked a few, then passed the dauber over when Leo’s came up. “You don’t look eighteen,” Stanley mused.

Leo nodded. "Yeah, I'm not. Don't tell."

Stanley cracked a grin. "Do I look like I have the energy to get up and go tell on you? Besides, kids never come around here. I only come here to beat my own boredom," he admitted.

"Huh," Leo said. "I came here for the same reason."

The man raised an eyebrow. "You're bored? Don't your legs work? Can't you go run and scream or fall off a skateboard or something?"

"You sound like my dad," Leo smirked.

"Yeah, I am somebody's dad. Only he and his kids live about a thousand miles that way," and Stanley pointed to one end of the hall.

"Oh," Leo said, not really sure how to respond.

"It's okay. I get out of my place, I come here, and every once and a while, I win." The man gave a grim smile.

"What do you win?" It hadn't occurred to Leo that there was some kind of prize.

"A cure for boredom, I suppose," Stanley chuckled, although it made Leo straighten to attention.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, really."

"A cure for boredom," Leo repeated. The title of the book. More letters and numbers. More stamps on the cards. Leo looked at Stanley's card. He looked at his own. Then he saw it—a diagonal row from one corner to the other—and his heart skipped a beat. He stood up, held the card above his head and called out, "Bingo!"

"Nice one, Leo!" Stanley said, standing to clap him on the back.

“So what happens now?” Leo asked, smiling.

“Well, you go and get your prize.”

Leo glanced around. “Where?”

All Leo could see was the guy who’d been twirling the cage of numbered balls. He waved for Leo to come up and join him. Leo turned, and Stanley was nodding. So were the other old people sitting around the tables. They were all motioning Leo to go to the front.

Leo shrugged, took the card and made his way to the man running the game. He was seated beside the cage, up on some wooden risers. “Card, please,” the man said, and Leo showed it to him.

The man narrowed his eyes, stared at Leo’s card and then at the balls sitting in a receptacle on the table beside him. “Looks like you’re our winner,” he said and smiled.

“Sweet,” Leo said. “So what’s the prize?”

He didn’t see anything anywhere. Maybe the prize was money. “Do I trade the card in for cash?”

“You’re right about trading,” the man smiled, handing him back the card. Then the man looked past Leo and over to Stanley, who was back at their table. “Does he still have it?”

“Have what?” Leo asked, not sure where this was going.

Leo turned and saw Stanley riffling through his backpack, which he’d left slung over his chair. He frowned. “Hey, that’s mine.”

But Stanley didn’t respond. He pulled out the old book and held it up. “Here it is!” he said.

Leo saw the book, turned to the man running the bingo game and shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“You’ve won,” the man said, beaming. “The cure for boredom!”

“No,” Leo said, still shaking his head and backing up now too. He lost his balance as he stepped off the riser, nearly falling back and knocking his head on the tile floor below. But before he could smash his skull, a pair of hands caught him. Held him and helped him stand up.

Leo turned and saw... Stanley. How had he gotten here so quickly?

Not just Stanley. The other old people from the bingo hall had gotten up from the tables. They were moving toward him. “He’s won,” one of them said, pointing at him.

“I want to go,” Leo said, trying to step away, but Stanley’s fingers grabbed the back of his shirt. Those fingers were old and weathered, but Stanley’s grip was vise-tight. Leo made a move to dart away, but he couldn’t break free.

He gasped, screamed, taking in gulps of air, and now he could smell something else under the putrid musk of old person and old cigarette smoke. Something else.

“The cure,” Stanley said, his mouth open, his teeth yellow and brittle, his breath fetid and rotten.

The whole place was filling up with a smell that had been masked all this time.

Leo’s field of vision was now obscured as the old people clustered around him. Sunken eyes, liver-spotted skin, moles and warts all pushing up against him, and skeletal hands grabbing his shirt, his ears, his hair, his neck.

He pushed and kicked. Maybe he could beat his way past one of them or two of them, but not all.



Leo yelped, and a withered hand grabbed hold of his mouth, pulling at his jaw.

He screamed and bit down, but he was just biting onto bone and finger, drawing no blood. His eyes searched past the mob, and he caught sight of something in the corner of the bingo hall.

A pile of clothes. Not old-people clothes, but kid clothes. Brightly colored running shoes. Shoes that had been white and clean but were stained with tinges of brown and red that made Leo's skin crawl.

Then the view was blocked as the faces and hands pressed against him, smothering him in a ball of ancient limbs and torsos.

Leo had once had a vision in his head that he was at the center of a cluster of snakes pressing in as they hibernated and shared their heat. This was kind of like that, only he was the thing making all the heat now.

He tried one last time to push away, but his limbs were all entangled with their cold appendages. They didn't even feel like arms and legs anymore. Or was it that he didn't feel *his* arms and legs anymore?

Or any part of himself, for that matter.

The good news was, Leo would never be bored again.

GORY GARY



Eva lit the candles and closed the door. The bathroom was almost like a cubicle, with only enough space for her, Shani and the toilet. She looked in the mirror at her reflection and made a face. “You sure about this?”

“It’ll be fine,” Eva said. “It’s not real.”

“Then why are we doing it?”

“Well, you know. Just in case it is.”

Shani shrugged. She usually went along with whatever Eva asked her to do. Eva was never boring.

Eva licked her lips, stared into her flickering reflection in the mirror and said it. “Bloody Mary.” Then she turned to Shani. “Okay, your turn now.”

“Bloody Mary,” Shani said a moment later, also staring into the mirror.

The girls turned to one another and giggled. Nervously.
“You sure about this?” Shani asked again.

Eva nodded, although uncertainly. “Okay then. On three.”

“One, two, three...”

“BLOODY MARY.”

And, of course, nothing happened.

Not at first.

But just as Eva was about to turn around, flick the lights back on, blow out the candles and get on with other stuff, like joining the online chat group all the cool kids in the school were in, she noticed something.

Behind them was a shape.

Not the door. Not anything hanging off the door, like a wet towel.

It was a human shape.

Eva’s eyes went wide. She elbowed Shani and nodded to the thing behind her.

“What...the...”

“What do we do?”

“I know.” Eva whirled around, held up her phone and thrust it toward the figure behind her. “SMILE, MARY!” she exclaimed.

Before the figure behind them could react, there was a flash of light that bounced off the mirror, blinding everyone.

“Gah!” Eva shouted, dropping her phone.

“Waaagh!” Shani barked, shielding her eyes.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” a gurgling male voice asked.

“Huh?”

Eva bent down, grabbed the phone and looked at the photograph.

She'd been too close, of course. The image was blurry and captured just one eye, the dented nose, the dripping flesh of the face and—

“Ewwww!” Shani winced, staring at the image on the phone. “What is *that*?”

“That,” the man’s voice continued, plucking the phone from Eva’s hand and staring at the image, “is me. And you did not have my permission to take that.”

It was still hard to make out all of this man’s features in the semi-lit room. But one thing was certain. This was not Bloody Mary.

“Who are you?” Eva asked. “What happened to Bloody Mary?”

The man finished clicking a few buttons on the phone, and the girls heard the sound of an image being trashed. “She was busy. They sent me instead.”

“Who *are* you?” Shani asked.

“Me?” the man returned, handing the phone back to Eva. She felt his hand brush hers. It was a human hand, but the flesh was soft and spongy, like a thing left out in a damp forest for a month and on which things were growing and insects were burrowing. He had the smell of rot about him. “I’m Gory Gary.”

Eva looked at Shani, then back at the hideous thing before them. Their eyes were now adjusting again to the dim candlelight of the room.

He looked like something that had been dug out of a grave, only not a fresh grave—one from, like, three months

ago. Not quite fully rotten, but getting there. His skin was somewhere between gray and green, his eyeballs were starting to cloud over, and in the tangled mess of hair were crawling little things: grubs, centipedes—it was anyone’s guess. One of his ears dropped off the side of his head and splatted onto the floor. “That’s disgusting,” Eva said.

“And gory,” Gory Gary said with a hint of pride.

“So what exactly do you...uh...do?” Eva squinted down at the ear.

“Well,” Gory Gary started, taking a breath as if about to say something. He exhaled. He stared at the girls. “Well, what do you want me to do?”

Shani motioned at herself and Eva. “You know, *terrify* us.”

Gory Gary grimaced. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. One of his ankles cracked, and he lost his balance and stumbled toward the far wall. He tried to regain his footing and ended up plopping down on the toilet seat. “Oh, dang it!”

“No,” Eva said. “Not at all scary.”

Gory Gary lifted his leg and jabbed a putrid finger at his foot, which was now dangling at the ankle. “Well, this is going to take *forever* to heal.” He looked around the bathroom. “Also, this room has a smell.”

“It’s a bathroom.”

“You tried to summon me in a bathroom?”

“We tried to summon Bloody Mary,” Shani said.

Gory Gary sighed. “Well, I can tell you one thing. She would *not* be impressed with this place.” Then he took his foot with both hands and twisted it so the girls heard a loud *CRACK* and then a *POP*.

Eva winced. “Uh, *ouch?*”

Gory Gary shrugged, planted his foot down on the floor and tried to stand up. The girls could see that the ankle didn't quite work, that the foot was still at an uncomfortable angle, but somehow the rotting man before them managed to hobble closer to them. His eyes, milky white, gleamed in the candlelight. He opened his mouth to display a crooked row of yellowing teeth, several of which were missing. “Say,” he rasped. “You guys got something to eat?”



Eva watched in a combination of amazement and disgust as Gory Gary chewed on the peanut butter sandwich she'd slapped together. Some of the half-chewed bits and pieces fell back to the table, and others disappeared down Gary's throat. He didn't swallow the way a normal person would, and Eva wondered if he even had the ability to digest food.

She turned to Shani, who was also standing in the kitchen, trying to keep a good distance from the revolting ghoul.

“What do we do with him now?” Shani whispered.

“I dunno.” Eva shrugged.

“I didn't even think Bloody Mary was real. I thought we were just having fun.”

“Well, Gory Gary is in the kitchen,” Eva said. “My parents will be home soon. Do we just ask him to leave?”

“I can hear what you're saying,” Gory Gary said.

“Okay,” Eva said. “So just finish your sandwich and, you know, back to Goryland you go, right?”

Gory Gary swallowed the last slimy mass of peanut-butter mush and tried to force it down his gullet. It got stuck there, and he had to choke it down. “Whew,” he gasped at last. “Can’t swallow the way I used to.” He pointed at his throat. “The muscles atrophy the longer you stay in limbo.”

Eva was covering her mouth like she was going to barf.

“What are you talking about?” Shani asked.

“Here’s the thing,” Gary said. He paused. “I kind of lied to you.”

“About what?”

“Uh, it wasn’t that Bloody Mary was busy. It’s more like I was bored.”

Shani raised her eyebrows. “Come again?”

“It’s always ‘Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody’—” Gory Gary stopped. “Whoops. Don’t want to say it three times! But you know what I mean. People always do the ritual for her. Not for me. I want a piece of the action too.” His voice had turned whiny.

“What action?” Eva asked. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, living-people stuff.” He pointed at the empty plate. “You know, like eating food. That was delicious.”

“That was disgusting,” Shani said.

“Agree to disagree,” Gory Gary returned.

“You can’t stay here,” Eva huffed. She crossed her arms angrily. “My parents are coming home from work. If they see you here, they’ll totally *freak out*.”

Gary bounded up from the table. “That sounds great!”

“No, no, no!” Eva said. “We can’t do that. I’ll totally get grounded. We’ve got to take you someplace else.”

“But where?” Shani asked.

The girls looked at each other. Then they nodded and smiled.



“Where are we exactly?” Gary asked from underneath the long raincoat the girls had insisted he wear.

“The mall, you dummy!”

Gory Gary peered out from under his hood at all of the hubbub. It was not easy to do, as throngs of shoppers clutching bags pushed past him. He was lost in the babble of noise, the smells wafting from the food court and all the astounding glass storefronts advertising the latest this and the most fashionable that.

Gory Gary shook his head. “I do not understand this place at all.”

“You know what I’m thinking,” Shani said to Eva.

“I do,” Eva said.

“I do not,” Gory Gary said, but he was cut off as both girls yelled at the same time.

“MAKEOVER!!!!”



“So what am I supposed to do again?” Gary asked.

“You just sit in the chair,” Eva said.

“And you let them do your nails,” Shani added.



Gary was sitting in the chair. And he did have his hands out. They had entered under the sign on the glass frontage that read *NOICE NAILZ*. A crowd of attendants and random people from the mall had gathered around the girls and Gary. Maybe it was the smell coming off him. Maybe it was because he looked like a slab of meat that had been left in the sun for a few weeks. This was going to be the biggest challenge anyone at Noice Nailz had ever taken on.

Right now there were two women trying to remove his shoes, since the girls had requested a pedicure too.

“Something’s wrong with his ankle,” one of the attendants mused.

“Oh yeah, it broke,” Gary said.

The attendants exchanged concerned looks. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to a hospital?” one asked him.

“Or a morgue?” asked the other.

But it was Eva who stepped in. “You give this guy the best mani-pedi you’ve ever done. Do you know how long he’s been waiting for one?”

The attendants shook their heads.

“Just go with it,” Gary said. “These girls are pretty insistent.”

Then the one holding Gary’s boot gave a hefty yank. The boot came off in her hands. So did Gary’s foot.

“What—?” she gasped.

“Well, I tried to tell you,” Gary said.

The screams followed a moment later. This was the kind of thing that was going to clear all the business out of the salon.

Except the screams weren't coming from the crowd that had gathered around Gory Gary and the girls.

They were coming from the other side of Noice Nailz. From the *other* crowd that was gathered there, the one that everyone clustered around Gory Gary had been too busy to notice.

Eva and Shani turned. The attendants turned. People were trying to push through the crowd to see what all the commotion was about.

Then the crowd parted, clearing the way. Gary could see why. One of the chairs by the far wall was covered in dripping red liquid.

So was the person sitting in the chair.

The dripping red liquid was all over her hands. All over her nails. But it wasn't nail polish. The dripping red liquid was also streaming down her face, over her dress, simply *everywhere*. Puddles of it were on the floor now. Some of the people around her were trying to run away, but they were slipping in the puddles. This was quickly becoming a big mess.

The woman in the chair made eye contact with Gary.

Gary looked like he couldn't believe this. "What are *you* doing here?"

The woman shrugged. "I could ask the same of you."

Shani realized what was going on. She pointed at the woman. "Is that...?"

"Bloody Mary," sighed Gory Gary.

"Bloody *Mary*?" said Eva.

“*Bloody Mary?!*” exclaimed Shani a moment later. Neither of them noticed Gory Gary waving his hands, trying to get them to stop talking, to stop saying *that name*.

Too late. The woman in red had heard her name being called. Three times. Her eyes went wide. A big smile spread across her face. She got up from the chair. *Jumped* out of it, more like.

People in Noice Nailz were trying to get out of the way, but the woman turned, raised her hand and made a motion at the entrance.

The glass doors of the store slammed shut.

People inside started banging on the glass to get out.

People outside started trying to pull the doors open to get in.

None of them were going to have noice nailz when this was all over.

Eva and Shani cowered behind Gory Gary as Bloody Mary strode toward him, bent down to pick up Gary’s shoe (the one with the foot in it) and handed it back to him.

“Well,” she said, licking her fingernails clean, “I guess that’s the end of our weekend getaway.” She turned to survey the screaming customers. Then she cracked her knuckles, stretched her arms and took a deep breath. “Come on, Gary, let’s do this.”

Gory Gary let out a weary sigh. “No rest for the wicked,” he mused and got back to work.



part two

Dear Tanya,

First, let me send my utmost apologies for the manner in which you have likely discovered this letter. But it was important for you to understand not only that I know where you live but also that our shared acquaintance is very much alive and growing stronger.

As you know, *Pages of Doom* has been released to the general public. Thanks to your support, the caliber of this volume's stories is the most potent yet. The ink assures me that this is going to be the very last book that is needed before it reaches its full potential.

I do not wish to harm you or your friend any more than necessary, if at all. I appreciate your attempts to reconvene, and I must agree: it is high time that the three of us meet to discuss next steps, both for yourselves and the ink.

Yours truly,
Joel A. Southland

That settled it. She left a message with Southland's publisher saying that Tanya, Niah and Southland would meet at the coffee shop where Brad worked. It wasn't the chain store that always had a big line with no elbow room. This was the old coffee shop that had been in the neighborhood for years, with ratty old couches that looked like they'd been there since the place opened thirty years ago. There was an entrance on the side and one up front, and windows lined the whole building.

When the meeting day arrived, Tanya and Niah positioned themselves at a table right in the middle of the café. Niah was nervously drumming her fingers on its surface.

"What if he doesn't show?" Tanya wondered aloud.

"He'll be here," Niah assured her.

And as if on cue, a dark shadow fell over them.

BOOM!

Two mugs slammed down on the laminate tabletop with such force that the hot, dark liquid within spilled over, running across the table and onto Tanya's lap.

"Whoops!"

Niah was quick to grab a handful of napkins and throw them to Tanya. "Brad, you dolt, don't you know how to serve people without spilling?"

Brad was tall and almost done high school now, and Tanya thought he would probably be cute if he didn't keep doing things like spilling drinks on people.

"Sorry, Tanya," he said, bending down to grab some napkins from the dispenser. But in doing so, he knocked one of the mugs over, spilling the hot chocolate inside, and then the mug rolled off the table and shattered. "Uh, whoops."

Niah rolled her eyes. "You are the clumsiest person I know. How did you even get this job?"

Brad shrugged. "They had a Help Wanted sign, and I wanted to help."

"Maybe you can help us find another table while you wipe this one down," Niah said as she and Tanya got up, trying to avoid the mess.

"Yeah, but look, you said you wanted one in the middle of the place, for safety, and the only other free one is all the way over there, by the back door."

"It's fine," Niah said. "Anything." She checked her phone. "He'll be here soon now."

The girls left Brad to mop up his mess while they moved to the spot at the back.

Tanya slid into the chair and put her elbows on the table, which wobbled under her weight.

"You guys want more hot chocolate?" Brad called from where he was cleaning up.

"Does it come in mugs or out of them?" Niah asked.

"Hardy har har," Brad said, straightening up. "But I'm the one who gets paid at the end of the week."

"If he isn't fired by then," Niah said under her breath.

Tanya let out a snort. She'd been so nervous this whole time that the laughter came out in a spasm, and that got Niah laughing, and then the two girls let the giggles run through them for a full minute or so. By that time, the other person on staff had brought over replacement hot chocolates.

"On the plus side," the girl said, "he does clean the dishes well. When he's not breaking them."

Tanya lifted her mug to take a sip, getting a whipped cream mustache in the process.

This got Niah chuckling again, and Tanya felt her hand tremble. “Don’t make me laugh,” she said. “I don’t want this spilling again!”

The girls were giggling so hard they didn’t even notice the door behind them opening, not until a cool breeze blew into the coffee shop. In sidled Joel Southland, dressed in slacks, a button-up shirt and a blazer. “Hello, Tanya, hello, Niah.” He smiled as he seated himself opposite the girls. “I’m glad we have the chance to meet face-to-face again.”

The girls had last encountered Southland at his publisher’s office. They’d tried to stop the publication of his latest book—the one now in stores—only to get trapped in a room with the ink, which had put them to sleep. Niah remembered waking up in the lobby of the building, with business going on as usual, like nobody cared they’d been attacked. Like it had never happened.

Now Joel Southland sat patiently at their table. Niah, meanwhile, felt her blood boiling. She looked at the mug of hot chocolate in front of her and thought about throwing it in his face.

“I trust you received the letters,” he said.

“We got them, all right,” Niah said.

“Listen,” Southland said, “I know what you’re thinking. Every time we run into one another, bad things happen with the ink. First you come barging into my publisher’s office—very unprofessional of you, I might add—and then you start leaving messages about having something you want to use against me. What did you *think* I was going to do?”

Before the girls could respond there came the sound of a clearing throat, and all three looked up to find Brad standing there awkwardly. “What would you like to drink?” Brad stared at Southland, his eyes narrowed in some kind of near-recognition. “Hey, I know you.” He looked at the girls, then back at Southland, trying to piece this together. “You’re that guy,” he said.

“You gotta be kidding me, Brad,” Niah said. “That’s Joel Southland.”

“The guy, yeah.”

“He’s a famous author,” Tanya added.

“Mm-hmm,” Brad said, mulling this fact.

“He unleashed a bunch of dream-snatching ink at you,” Niah finished.

Brad shrugged. “I don’t remember any of that.”

“You wouldn’t.” Southland shrugged. “I’ll have a decaf. One cream. No sugar.”

Brad furiously scrawled something onto a notepad. “No sugar,” he repeated under his breath, then turned and headed back to the kitchen.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” Southland said. “You need to understand that this isn’t just about selling books. The ink has dwelled within the bowels of this planet for longer than the printed page. It’s what informed the stuff of myth and legend. It *wants* to come out. And it needs us too. If we’re on its side, we’re safe. So why don’t we just let it out?”

“Why are you trying to help this thing?” Tanya asked. “Do you honestly think that ink is going to spare you from what it wants?”

Southland shook his head. "You've been going about this all wrong, girls."

"Have we?"

He gave them a patronizing look. "The ink only wants coexistence. It has been here for millions of years, since dinosaurs roamed the planet. It coexisted with them as well. And when they died out, the ink became dormant. It went into hibernation. It awoke many years later, found me and learned about everyone now inhabiting the planet's surface. Humans have dreams and minds unlike any other species. Our fears provide them with such delicious nourishment. Here," Southland said, reaching into his pocket. "Allow me to show you." Tanya and Niah tensed as he pulled out a small vial no thicker than his pinkie finger. He set it on the table. It was full of a dark liquid that seemed to slosh around of its own accord.

It was just a little thing, insignificant in size, but it drew Tanya in like a magnet. The substance contained within the vial wasn't just a dark shade of black. It was as if someone had cut out a square of starless night and folded it upon itself tenfold.

She'd seen the ink before, but this was different. It was like staring into a void. Tanya swallowed and found that her throat had gone dry.

TANYA...

She looked over at Niah, who was also staring at the vial but with a more quizzical expression. Niah was reaching out to touch it, but Tanya slapped her hand away. "Don't," she said, feeling her muscles clench in fight-or-flight mode.

WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR
AN AUDIENCE WITH YOU.

She knew the voice in her head. It was the ink's. It wasn't even a voice, really, just a thought that pulsed through her. It had spoken to her before, in dreams and sometimes even when she was awake. But this ink sounded different. *Stronger*.

"What do you want from me now?" Tanya asked the ink. Instead of think-talking, she'd spoken aloud, and this caught Niah's attention.

"Tanya, you okay?"

IT IS TRUE. WE USED YOU, JUST AS WE USED MR. SOUTHLAND TO GET WHAT WE NEED. HE HAS THE POWER TO GET THE DREAMS INTO AS MANY HANDS AS POSSIBLE. YOU COLLECTED THE STORIES, AND HE TOOK THEM. MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE READING THEM, SPREADING NEW FEARS AND CREATING DREAMS THAT ARE EVEN MORE POTENT. NOW WE ARE NEARLY COMPLETE. SOUTHLAND'S BOOKS HAVE DISTILLED THE NIGHTMARES WITH EACH STORY WE HAVE PRINTED.

"Tanya?" Niah tried again.

"Shhh," Southland said. "You know her well enough to see the ink is speaking to her." He stared at Tanya. "You must do as it says. I've done my part."

"What are you going to do?" Tanya asked, shaking herself out of the trance and turning from the ink to Southland. He did not respond.

“We’re not doing a darn thing for you,” Niah snapped. She got up from the table. “C’mon, Tanya, we’re going.”

“Sorry,” Joel said, calmly but with an air of menace, “but I can’t let you do that.”

Niah froze in place, eyeing Southland. “We don’t have to do anything for you or that...stuff,” she sneered, jabbing a finger at the vial on the table.

Southland picked up the vial and waved it in front of them. “You see how concentrated this has become? When you first encountered the ink, I required an entire line of writing for the substance to work its way into you. *Joel A. Southland, Stay Scared* was enough to do the trick. But this? Just a drop or two will suffice now.”

Tanya gulped. “What have you done?”

“Nothing that I can’t handle,” Southland said, still focused on the vial of ink.

“He’s *already* done something with it,” Niah said. Then she glanced down at her mug.

Tanya looked into her own mug too. There was barely any hot chocolate left in it. She suddenly felt very dizzy. She stood up and backed away from the table.

“Sir,” she heard a voice say. It was one of the patrons behind her, a middle-aged woman. Tanya turned and saw Brad going over to her table.

“How can I help?” he asked.

“Something’s wrong with my drink. It’s got a funny aftertaste.”

TANYA, THE TIME OF OUR AWAKENING IS NOW.

Tanya looked into Southland's eyes. "No. Why would you do this? You can't control the ink," she said.

"Who said I wanted to control it?"

Then, from behind them, came a scream. Then the sound of breaking glass.

Tanya turned just in time to see the woman knocking over her chair and staggering across the floor. She was still screaming. Her mug lay in shards on the floor.

Brad stood there, shaking his head. "Is the coffee really *that* bad?"

More screams. This from people in a booth a few paces away. Tanya thought they were reacting to the woman, but no. They also lurched out of their seats, their eyes focused on one another, pointing, screaming.

And then Tanya saw. Little rivulets of black ink dripping from the corners of their mouths, speckling their hands.

Niah was staring at the chaos too. More and more people in the place started screaming, shouting. They staggered about. Three people made a break for the doors at the front, but one of them tripped on a chair leg and the others stopped to help.

The cacophony rang in Tanya's ears. "Stop it!" she shouted at Southland, who was doing nothing.

"I can't. It's already happening." He motioned to the pandemonium around them.

Niah was already racing toward the glass front doors. She used all her strength to try to force them open, but they wouldn't budge. "Locked?" she said. "How?" But then she saw Southland sitting quietly in his chair and *knew*. Somehow



Southland had done this. Looking past the oncoming crowd, she shouted to Brad, "Go and get the spare keys!"

"Right." Brad nodded, dashed to the back kitchen and disappeared from view.

OUR TIME, TANYA...

"You locked the doors," Tanya breathed, her horror mounting. "You set this whole thing up."

Southland merely shrugged.

Niah leaped out of the way as the crowd surged against the glass doors, fingers and faces mashing together and smudging the glass, which was fogging up in the panic. The doors heaved on their hinges, threatening to buckle and snap open. And they would have, except...

Except the screams shifted into gasps and long, heavy breaths, and the movements slowed. The people stepped back, slipping and tumbling.

They fell down onto the floor. Onto each other.

Fell down and fell asleep.

Niah watched as the ink raced out from their mouths in rivulets that traveled down their necks and up into the corners of their eyes, filling them, turning them into black orbs that blinked helplessly, then closed.

In just a few moments, the last of the people were asleep on the floor, convulsing and moaning as nightmares overtook them.

Tanya stood up, eyes searching the room and seeing that only she and Niah were still awake, along with Southland.

Niah called out. “Brad?” No answer. “Brad?!”

“Looks like he was drinking some coffee on the job,” Southland said, shaking his head. “Come on,” he urged the girls. “We don’t have much time.”

“You did this,” Niah said, still shocked at the sight before her. The customers on the floor were twitching in terror.

Southland got on his knees and crawled to one of the sleeping forms. He was used to collecting the ink—standing outside buildings he’d released it into, waiting in the shadows, gathering it up after it had invaded a host. But this was more personal, more immediate. All he did was take his thumb and index finger and hold open one of the victim’s eyes. Even from where she stood, Tanya could see that the entire eye was black, no white left.

He held an empty vial close to the eye. But the ink didn’t budge. Southland let go, and the eye closed. “Hmm,” he said. “Interesting.”

He stood up and moved away from the pile of sleepers, his gaze falling on the girls. “I know what you’re thinking. Why doesn’t the ink leave them?”

Tanya and Niah turned to one another. Niah shrugged.

Southland continued. “It doesn’t need to leave anymore. It’s ready. Think of those nightmares like...nectar. Bees collect nectar. They regurgitate it and regurgitate it until that nectar gets refined into honey. Honey feeds the bees. Honey never goes bad. Honey is around forever. Kind of like this ink. When I discovered it, the ink was just some leftover nectar. And now?”

Tanya felt panic filling her chest. “Honey,” she responded.

Southland nodded. “It doesn’t need to come back and write the dreams out anymore. The dreams are simply coursing

through these people, one after another. The ink connects them. Oh, I'm sure they'll wake. The ink needs to feed on the dreams, and the person dreaming still needs to eat in order to sustain life. But the ink won't ever leave the bodies."

"That's horrible," Niah croaked. "These people will just keep slipping into nightmares for the rest of their lives?" She gulped. "And what about Brad?"

Southland dug into his pocket. He pulled out a small eyedropper. "The ink wanted us here," he said. "You and I, Tanya. And Niah too. It wants us to see." He bent over another sleeper close to him. Forced the sleeper's eye open and positioned the eyedropper at the corner of the inky black eyeball. Slowly he extracted a small amount of ink and then turned to face the girls. He held up the eyedropper. "This is what the ink has been building up to. Perfect fusion with humanity."

Tanya and Niah turned to one another and exchanged terrified looks. "Get that thing away from us!" Tanya yelled, backing away.

"Oh, you two. You think I'm going to use this on you?" He moved past them to one of the tables and pushed the coffee cups and plates aside. They clattered to the floor, one of them shattering. Nobody else stirred. "Come and look at this," he said, pulling out a menu and flipping it over to show a blank page.

Then, carefully, he released the concentrated ink and watched as it began to thin out, forming letters, words and a new nightmare.

THE HIDDEN CHAPTER



“Open your book to page 68,” Mr. Leon intoned.

Marty looked at the math textbook on his desk. It was a hardbound edition with a heavy cover and thick enough to stop a door with. It apparently also had the power to put all the students that read it to sleep or, at least, some kind of waking half-sleep, judging by the looks on the faces of his classmates.

The textbook was old. Marty wanted to think it was older than time itself, but flipping the cover open and scanning the title page, he could see that it had been printed only fifteen years earlier. That was still older than Marty by a few years.

“Page 68, if you please,” Mr. Leon said, raising his eyebrow in Marty’s direction.

“Oh, right, Mr. Leon,” Marty said, and turned the pages. It was still early in the school year, and they’d only just begun

using the textbook, yet Marty was already tired of it. It felt used and worn and kind of sad, in a way. Like it didn't want to be read. Marty didn't want to read it, at any rate.

Still...

Marty skimmed past the chapters on patterning, the one on transformational geometry, trying to find the page Mr. Leon had requested. *Page 68, 68, 68.* Somehow he'd already skipped ahead to page 87, on which he saw photos of children working on some kind of math problem, all with smiles on their faces, as if they wanted nothing more than to be determining the radiuses of twenty or more circles.

"Sixty-eight," Marty said under his breath.

He flipped back a few pages. The book had been used a lot over the past fifteen years. Most of the corners were dog-eared or looked as if they'd been chewed up by dogs. Many pages also contained answers scribbled below the questions, in pencil (rubbed out) or pen (crossed out), along with commentary from previous students. *THIS LESSON SUCKS*, one page proclaimed. Somebody had scribbled mustaches and goatees over the stock images of children on page 72 and added hairs sprouting from the clothed armpits of the kids. Marty cracked a smile but lost his page.

It wasn't that the math itself was bad. Marty recognized the value of numbers and patterns in his life, and he was sure that Mr. Leon did too, but the man at the front of his classroom lectured with such a dull monotone that it made Marty's attention wander back to the textbook before him. He first noted how the words *MATH SENSE 5* were nearly rubbed out by years' worth of dirty schoolkid hands, then

turned his attention to the thick fore edge of the book, where people had scrawled all kinds of rude and dirty messages. Most of them had been crossed out (by Mr. Leon?), and Marty thought about adding his own initials to the mess. But instead he grasped the pages between his hands and riffled through them once, twice.

Then, when the pages were set on a slight angle, Marty saw the words appear.

BEWARE THE

Marty stopped, losing his grip on the pages.

Mr. Leon stopped talking and fixed his attention on Marty. “Are you even paying attention, Marty?”

“Yes,” Marty lied.

“Stop lying to me.”

“Yes, Mr. Leon.”

“Did you even find page 68 yet?”

Marty flipped through the book again, searching for the elusive page. The pages moved evenly through his fingers, and Marty tracked the numbers written on the bottom right corner. “Sixty-eight,” he said to himself in a whisper. “C’mon, c’mon, where are you?”

Marty stopped flipping and looked at the number. Page 95. The second part of a lesson about three-dimensional solids. He furrowed his brow.

Then he saw the writing on the far left corner, right near the spine, almost disappearing into it. It looked as if someone had tried to smudge it out, but Marty could still

see the letters disappearing into the dark crack of the spine. He leaned closer, craning his neck down to his desk, and narrowed his eyes to make out the words:

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T TURN TO P1

Marty shook his head. Funny joke. He tried to pry the pages apart to expose more of the message to the fluorescent bulbs buzzing overhead.

TURN TO PAGE 68

Marty snapped the book shut and looked up to see Mr. Leon staring at him. “Is everything all right, Marty?”

“Everything is all right, Mr. Leon.”

“Except that you’ve closed the math book.”

“Yes,” Marty said, staring at the teacher.

Mr. Leon stood at the front of the room before a whiteboard full of math gobbledygook. He held a dry-erase marker in one hand and a copy of the math textbook in the other. He did not put either down. “You know you’re going to be tested on this, yes?”

“Yes,” Marty said, and shifted his attention back to the book. He opened it again, started thumbing through the pages, heard Mr. Leon resume his monotonous drone and then quietly stopped what he was doing. He closed the book and turned it back toward him so the fore edge was facing his way again. Then Marty pinched the pages between

his fingers and tilted them so that the words written on it appeared, and this time he saw the whole message:

BEWARE THE HIDDEN CHAPTER

Marty let go of the pages, flipped the book around and opened the front cover. He flipped one page, two pages, until he was staring at the table of contents. The chapters were outlined before him in a big, bold font. *Chapter 1: Number Sense. Chapter 2: Patterning. Chapter 3: Data Management.* And so on. He followed all the chapters, from 1 to 13, from page 1 of the book all the way to the other end at page 256. Hidden chapter? More like waste of time. He was about to try flipping to page 68 again, but his attention was taken with something else scrawled on the table of contents. Something in kid writing, small enough to get lost amid all of the other graffiti.

Front Front Back Front Back.

Marty stared at the words, mouthing them silently.

Most of the other graffiti contained lewd messages, or lewd pictures, or kids' initials. But this message made no sense. Even the weird warnings scrawled elsewhere had the feel of a good practical joke. But this was more like some kind of strange code that he desperately wanted to break. It was far more interesting than classwork.

Front, front, back, front, back, Marty said to himself again. What could it mean? Front of what? The classroom? Front of—

“The book,” Marty said, out loud and with certainty.

“I’m sorry?” Mr. Leon said. The board behind him was swimming with all kinds of mathematical formulas Marty should have been paying attention to.

“Page 68,” Marty said. “I’m on it.”

He turned back to the book and thumbed through the pages as if he was trying to turn to page 68 until he heard the drone of Mr. Leon’s voice again.

Then he turned to the front of the book.

The cover yielded nothing out of the ordinary. He flipped it over to reveal the inside front cover. Buried within a collage of signatures, scrawled notes and doodles was a word.

FRONT.

Marty nodded.

He flipped the book over to the inside back cover. All doodled up. And sure enough, there it was.

BACK.

Front, front, back, front, back, Marty said to himself.

He closed the book, because you had to reset it, right?

Then he opened it to the inner page. *Front front*, he told himself. You had to close the book, right? So you were looking at the cover again? There was no one to answer this question but Marty. He closed the book, opened it again.

Back, he told himself, and then flipped to the back page. Then to the front. And then he closed it one more time.

Back, he said again quietly.

He opened the book up to the back, and sure enough, it was the same back page. He'd half-expected something new to be lurking on there after following the instructions, but no. He was staring at the same graffiti and doodles from before. No hidden chapter. No warning. Nothing.

Marty breathed a shaky sigh of relief. Of course, it was some stupid joke! Kids in Mr. Leon's math class were bored out of their minds, what with their teacher and all his math gibberish (now taking up the entire whiteboard) going on about hypotenuses and angles of attack and breaking into multidimensional rifts and—

Marty looked up, heart in his throat. "What?"

Mr. Leon held the whiteboard marker in his hand. He was busy gesticulating at the board. Marty recognized some of the numbers and symbols on it. But there were other symbols too. Ones that looked like nothing he'd ever seen before.

"Did you get to page 68 yet?" Mr. Leon asked.

"What is going on here?" Marty asked the rest of the students, and he turned to look at his classmates, only to find—

"What the—?"

Only to find that it was just him and Mr. Leon in the room. Where had they gone?

Mr. Leon put the dry-erase marker down on the edge of the whiteboard. He still held the textbook in his hand. He took a few steps toward Marty. "You probably have a lot of questions by now," he said.

“Mr. Leon, what’s happening?” Marty’s voice came out in a choked whisper.

“You’ll find the answer on page 68.”

“No, not the math. This! Look around! What are you doing?! Everybody’s gone.”

“Page 68,” Mr. Leon said firmly.

“I can’t even FIND IT!” Marty snapped suddenly, angrily. “The pages never take me there. I keep missing it, like it’s—” Marty gulped. “Hidden.”

Mr. Leon didn’t say anything.

Marty looked back at the book. The faded title on the cover proclaimed *MATH SENSE 5*, accompanied by a photograph of a group of kids—all smiling, all holding scales and rulers and working on some kind of cheerful math problem.

Marty opened the book again. He started flipping through the pages.

Mr. Leon moved back to the board, making notes to the latest wave of calculations.

Marty took his pencil and scrawled something on the corner of the page while his teacher wasn’t looking.

“Are you there yet?” Mr. Leon asked, his back to Marty.

Marty stood up. He looked at the door.

“You can’t get out that way,” Mr. Leon said, turning to face Marty. “I mean, you could try. Do you want to try? Trial and error is a valid means of testing a mathematical theorem.”

Marty bolted for the door, grabbed the handle and pulled. It didn’t turn.

“You locked it,” Marty said.

He turned and made a beeline for the window. The parking lot was still and silent outside. He tried the window. It wouldn't budge.

Marty screamed. He rushed over to Mr. Leon's desk, grabbed the heavy hole punch on his desk and threw it as hard as he could at the window.

He stood there, waiting for the glass to shatter into pieces and rain down onto the floor.

Instead the hole punch tore a hole in it.

Marty narrowed his eyes. "What?"

He edged toward the window to the parking lot. Once he got a few feet closer, Marty realized that it wasn't a window to anything. It was the image of a window. It looked three-dimensional. But there was no movement outside. And the hole he'd punctured—

Marty bent down and peered into the hole.

He was staring into darkness.

It was impossible, of course.

Marty turned back to Mr. Leon, who had his arms folded across his chest. He looked impatient. Marty stared past him, at the clock above the door, which hadn't moved in...how long?

Mr. Leon cleared his throat, catching Marty's attention. He motioned to Marty's empty seat. The book was there, half open.

Marty felt his insides tighten. He edged back to the desk, back to the book.

He reached out to the book. His hands were shaking so much that he could barely keep hold of the pages. A drop of sweat (or a tear) splashed down on it.

He turned pages: 64, 65, 66, 67...

He turned again.

Marty shook his head.

There was just one word on page 68. It was written in big, bold letters.

SMILE

Marty looked up to see Mr. Leon standing over him. “Well?”

“What am I supposed—”

“Smile,” he said, and Marty could see that Mr. Leon was doing so. Except Mr. Leon couldn’t smile. He was using his fingers to dip into his mouth and pull his cheeks into a horrible grimace so that his teeth showed. “LIKE THIS!”

Marty got up, pushed the desk aside and backed away from Mr. Leon.

“COME ON, MARTY,” he said, leaning his head forward and stepping closer. “You can smile, can’t you? You did it for the school photograph, you can do it for Mr. Leon!”

Marty kept backing up, but now he was against the fake window. What did it even open to?

“You think you’re in school? You think this is a classroom?”

His face was so close. Marty closed his eyes, but he could feel Mr. Leon’s hot breath on him, feel the spittle against his own face.

“You’ve got to smile, Marty. It’s the only way out.”

“Out of where?”



“This place. You used the book. You’ve been using it. It mapped your face. Your body. It’s got you here. It took *me* too, and the only way to save yourself is if you *smile*.”

Marty opened his eyes.

Tears streamed down his cheeks.

As Mr. Leon turned away, Marty grabbed a pencil off the desk. He scribbled something down.

Then, shakily, he smiled.



Julia eyed the math book. It looked beat up. The words *MATH SENSE 5* and a collection of photos of kids playing with rulers and math gear smiled at her—maybe leered?—from the front cover.

She cracked open the textbook, thumbing through the pages. The thing was massive. Was she expected to get through this entire brick of a text in just a year?

Julia went through the pages one by one. She could see that there was lots of graffiti—but most of it had been crossed out. For some reason, she was having trouble skipping up to the lesson her teacher was asking her about.

Right now she was staring down at page 68.

The image of a boy about her age, busily working on math problems, stared back at her.

He was smiling.

“Ugh.” Julia winced. There was something about the picture that she didn’t like.

It was a forced smile. She could tell. It was the smile of someone who did not want to be posing for pictures in a textbook. Like the kid was supposed to be showing he was excited, but maybe he was sad. Or scared? She didn't want to look his picture right in the eye, so her gaze moved past the boy's face, past that smile. She was about to turn away from page 68 altogether, but then something else caught her attention. It was something jutting out of the pocket of the boy's shirt in the image. A slip of paper. It looked stained.

Julia got up. She went to the corner of the room where the science equipment was kept. Nobody seemed to notice. She grabbed the magnifying glass and went back to her desk.

Then, looking at the image with the lens, she stared at the picture until it was so close that it had been reduced to dots.

But the message was still clear.

DON'T TURN TO THE PAGE HE ASKS FOR.

Then, in smaller writing, so that Julia had to lean in really close:

AND DON'T SMILE.

"Julia?" a voice called out from above.

Julia looked up. Mr. Leon was standing over her. He saw where she was at, saw the image on the paper, and a smile came over his face. "Oh good, you found the page. Most people find the page, when it's time."

THE PET



Whenever Matthew wanted something, he would scream and shout and kick chairs over until his mother caved in and got him what he wanted. She always did.

Lately Matthew had been wanting something cuddly and playful. Something that could fetch a stick or curl up at his feet. A true companion. A best friend who would stay with him through thick and thin.

There was only one flaw to his plan.

“You don’t even clean up after yourself! How can I trust you to clean up after some mangy, fur-shedding beast?” Matthew’s mother said.

She had very good reasons for refusing him a pet. He was lazy. He constantly had to be reminded of things—like to wash his dishes or put on clean clothes or use soap.

She also didn't seem to get why he'd want a dog or a cat. Yet, despite her sometimes uncuddly nature—he swore at times that she was cold-blooded—she was not made of stone. In the end, for his birthday Matthew was given a five-gallon aquarium, a pump and filter, some blue gravel and a transparent plastic bag. In the bag, as might have been expected, was a fish.

“Make sure to put it in some water,” Matthew's mother said. “And come down for dinner!”

Matthew was on cloud nine. It was the first time he'd had anything alive in his room besides him. (And his mom—not that she counted.) “I could kiss you!” he shouted at the fish. But he kept his distance, because kissing was gross. And kissing a fish was even grosser.

“What's for dinner, anyway?”

“*Hippoglossus stenolepis*.”

Matthew made a face. “Huh?”

“HALIBUT!”



As the days passed, Matthew became a regular visitor to the pet store after school, adding fish to his collection daily. His mom even bought him a book so he could learn their scientific names and geographic origins. There was the black molly from Mexico, with a long fin that looked like a sail. A shoal of bright-red-and-blue neon tetras from the Amazon Basin, who shimmered as they swam. The Australian black-and-white zebrafish. Even a couple of cute guppies from Bolivia, with motley-colored fantails.

The one that got the most attention was the Kuhli loach, all the way from Indonesia. *Pangio kuhlii* (with two *i*'s) was its scientific name. Matthew had worked the hardest to learn this name, which he shortened to Pangio. This eel-shaped bottom feeder, yellow with brown bands, had been his first purchase, suggested by his mother, and he just seemed special. There was something *about* Pangio—he had a personality, and for some reason Matthew related to him differently. It might have been his black beady eyes, bugging out on either side of his head. Or his unblinking stare—was he asleep? Or was he up to something cunning? It was definitely a love-hate relationship. Sometimes Matthew would slam his fist against the table the aquarium was on just to watch Pangio scuttle around in panic.

The tricks and rules that went with raising fish took some getting used to. For instance, not pouring all the fish food into the tank at one go.

“Mom, why is my black molly floating upside down?” he asked one day.

“You mean the *Poecilia sphenops*?” she said with dismay. “It’s *dead*!” She seemed unusually upset. “Matthew, you have to be more careful with your pets. Some of them are quite...delicate.” His mother fixed the tank with a stare that went on a moment too long.

Matthew hurriedly scooped the molly out and flushed it down the toilet. The last thing he felt like now was dinner, especially if it turned out to be fish.

“Hurry down. We’re having *Gadus morhua*!”

His mother had really taken this fish stuff seriously and would use only the scientific terms now. She meant cod.

Matthew figured he was getting really good at these names. And with a sigh, he headed down to the kitchen.



The next day Matthew woke up and realized that he was, in fact, having second thoughts about his aquarium and his fishy friends. He sure didn't have the same passion his mother did when it came to caring for them. He wished he could take them out and pet them like other animals.

"Mom, why are my guppies all dry and crunchy?"

"The *Poecilia reticulata*? You probably overfed them again. Matthew, this is very disappointing."

Matthew plugged his ears to drown out his mother, then scooped and flushed.

"Now hurry up! Your *Hoplostethus atlanticus* is getting cold."

Matthew shook his head. That was orange roughly, wasn't it? His mother sure was fish-focused these days.

And there was no end in sight to her obsession. He wished that for his birthday she had given him a simple chemistry set or a magic-act kit.

"Mom, I think it's curtains for the tetras," Matthew called down a few days later. It was hard to be heard over his mother's sea shanty album, playing at the usual ear-splitting volume.

"You mean the *Paracheirodon innesi*?"

"You said it!" he yelled back.



As it turned out, it wasn't long before Matthew had accidentally done away with each and every fish in his tank. All except for one. Pangio, that most unusual Kuhli loach. Matthew couldn't kill him if he tried. The wretched thing just sat there at the bottom of the tank, glubbing to himself. He was half-wedged under the filter, and Matthew could swear he was not only watching but somehow waiting. His gills swished the water back and forth methodically as he glubbed. It was eerie.

Glub. Glub. Glub.

The curse of the loach. *Pangio kuhlii*. With two *i*'s—to say nothing of the two *eyes* that kept him continually under surveillance. It was creepy. No, it was fishy. That was it. Fishy.

Glub. Glub. Glub.

Glub by day, *glub* by night.

It was keeping Matthew awake, and the sleep deprivation was affecting his judgment. He couldn't seem to find a solution. Then one morning he awoke from his typical nightmarish sleep and felt suddenly relieved. He had a plan.

Glub. Glub. Glub.

A plan so simple, it was brilliant. He moved the aquarium to the basement. That way he would get some peace and quiet.

Matthew took one long last look at Pangio, glubbing there at the bottom of the tank in the dim basement light. "Everything's going to be okay," Matthew lied. "The basement is a...*happy* place."

Pangio swished, glubbed harder and gave Matthew a stare that felt like he was cutting holes through him. Matthew quickly turned away. He ran up the stairs two at a time and slammed the door, leaving Pangio in the mysterious deep of his new home.

Matthew snickered to himself, then felt a shudder as goose bumps traveled across his skin. Did he have it in him to leave the fish there in the darkness, all alone? Was that enough to put an end to his aquatic menagerie? Did he even have the right to do so? The questions swam through Matthew's mind. Still, he left Pangio there, reasoning that it was just a matter of time before he'd expire. Pangio was certainly a hardy loach, but no fish could last long in that basement. Soon enough he too would be ready for the flushing treatment, and then Matthew could go and buy a tarantula or an iguana—*anything*, as long as it didn't *glub*.



The days and weeks and months passed, and Matthew gradually stopped thinking about Pangio and the miserable aquarium adventure. Surprisingly, his mother didn't bring it up either. So life went on in its humdrum way, and Matthew continued to be lazy.

One Wednesday he came home from school, strode over to the kitchen and opened the cupboard. His mother wasn't home from work yet, so he had a bit of time before he had to start his chores. He took out a bag of shrimp chips and slammed the door shut.

Matthew dipped his fingers greedily into the bag and scuffed his way down the hall to the TV room.

Wednesdays had the best cartoons. He always tried to watch as many as he could before dinner. Crunching down another few chips, Matthew burped in contentment. The

sun was slowly sinking outside the window behind him, and with his stomach full now, he began to nod off.

Suddenly he sat up with a jolt. Something had woken him from his dreams, and he didn't know what—yet. He cocked an ear and listened intently.

Very faintly, behind the cartoon music, Matthew heard a sound.

He got up from the easy chair and turned off the TV.

There it was again. He held his breath, keeping as quiet as he could, and tried to pinpoint the source of the noise.

He looked down. His eyes roamed across the floor. Beside the sofa. Under the chair. There it was. Coming from the vent.

His heart pounding in his ears, Matthew got down on his hands and knees. He pushed the chair aside and pressed his head against the grill. A gust of warm air blew into his ear, and there was a rank smell he couldn't identify.

Glub. Glub.

Matthew put his hand up to his heart.

Glub. Glub. Glub. Glub.

“Pangio,” he whispered to himself, horrified.

It was the last thing he wanted to do, but he knew he had no choice. He had to go down there and deal with the Kuhli loach before his mother got home.



The basement door creaked open, and Matthew's shadow stretched out from behind his head, long and distorted, against the boxes and musty piles of books and toys below. Flashlight

in one hand, fishing net in the other, Matthew took one shaky step down. The stairs were slimy, which seemed impossible, but he had no time to figure out why. He had no free hand, the light was bad, time was short and his heart was pounding.

Glub. Glub. Glub.

Matthew made it down the last slippery step to the concrete. It was cold and wet, and he felt as if his body heat was being sucked from the soles of his feet.

Glub. Glub. Glub.

The basement ceiling was trailing layers of cobwebs, and the air was thick with foul-smelling mold. Matthew cast the flashlight slowly around. Finally he spotted a cord dangling in front of his face and gave it a yank. The bulb flickered to life.

“AAAGGGGH!”

Matthew jumped back, dropping the flashlight. Then, with what little courage he had left, he recovered it and shone it directly ahead, letting out a heavy sigh as he realized he was staring at his own distorted reflection in the fish tank.

It was covered in sickly green algae and looked utterly lifeless.

He stopped to listen. There was no glubbing whatsoever. Nothing.

Matthew heaved a sigh of relief, chuckled to himself and slammed his fist against the aquarium glass. “What an idiot. I could have been watching cartoons all this time.” He was about to head back upstairs when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

He turned back around and lowered the flashlight beam carefully.

There it was, undeniable. The letter **M** written right through the algae.

Matthew froze. As he watched, transfixed, other letters soon followed.



AT THE WIT IS TIME
A T T H E W

He shook his head and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

Then he looked back. This time the flashlight was trembling.



I T

...



I S

...



T I M E

He mouthed the words without speaking. *Matthew, it is time.*

Glub. Glub. From inside the aquarium.

Matthew screamed and dropped the net.

Glub. Glub.

Upstairs, the front door slammed shut.

“MOM!” Matthew shouted, trying to get to the stairs.
“GET DOWN HERE! QUICK!”

There was no answer. What was keeping her?

Glub. Glub.

He heard his mother’s footsteps slowly descending the stairs and turned around. Matthew made a frantic move toward her but tripped. He sat in the cold, moldy dark, his flashlight rolling away from him.

“Mom! Mom! Pangio’s alive, and he’s trying to kill me!”

He reached out toward his mother’s legs, then suddenly drew back. A puddle of water was slowly spreading across the concrete around her feet. Her whole lower body was drenched.

He reached for the flashlight, managed to just get purchase and shone it slowly up to her face. His mother was towering over him, smiling coldly. Her eyes. They were cold too. And they were jiggling in their sockets.

She took a slow step forward and rolled her head from left to right. In a second her eyes popped right out and dropped to the floor with two wet slaps! The skin at the sides of her neck expanded and contracted. Liquid burst out, then slits appeared and began to open and close, sucking in air every few seconds. The face swelled so much, Matthew thought it would burst. But it wasn’t a face anymore.

“Mom?”

“*Pangio kublii,*” she called out, and she wiped a gooey slurp of something from her chin. She whispered, as if in a trance, “*Filius meus.*”

This was really weird. That was no kind of fish name he knew. Matthew was just about to ask her to explain when his mother cast her empty eye sockets upon him and said in a hard voice, accompanied by a loveless smile, “Filius meus. My son.”

Then she lifted her hands to her ears, took hold of the lobes on each side and began to pull, revealing a gleaming layer of something beneath.

In one clean yank she succeeded in retracting her entire face and scalp, then flung it in triumph to the concrete at Matthew’s feet.

Leering at Matthew, gills and all, was a giant fish head.

“Filius meus!” she breathed again. “My son.” Matthew gave her—*it*—a horrified look, then noticed that it was not looking at him, but at the aquarium behind him. He turned and gasped.

The lid of the aquarium was now propped open, and rising steadily from the stinking tank was the filthy *Pangio kuhlii*, his beady eyes staring through Matthew.

The fish mother slopped past Matthew, treading on what moments before had been her human face, and delivered a maternal kiss to Pangio with her dripping fish lips.

Matthew slowly got to his feet, aghast at what he was seeing.

The fish woman turned back to him and fixed him with glaring saucer eyes. Her neck slits were pumping air in and out, in and out.

“YOU WANTED A PET, DIDN’T YOU?” she gurgled. “WELL, SO DID WE. BUT PANGIO HAS OUTGROWN



SUCH THINGS. YOU WERE AN INTERESTING PET, BUT UNDESERVING OF OUR CARE. MATTHEW, IT IS TIME.”

Matthew shrunk back, recognizing the message.

With one step forward and a swift scoop with a scaly arm, the fish woman lifted Matthew off the floor. Behind her, Pangio was writhing out from the aquarium for a better look at the boy.

Matthew struggled to wriggle free, but the fish grasp was too strong, and the scales’ prickly edges stuck into his skin, drawing blood. He squirmed from side to side, watching Pangio as the fish woman slowly dragged him up the stairs and to the bathroom, toilet plunger in hand.

A minute or so of silence passed.

A faint scream from upstairs—a boy’s scream.

And a toilet’s flush.

Satisfied, Pangio slid back into his tank and waited for his mother.



part three

The wail of sirens and the glare of flashing blue and red lights caught Tanya's attention. She looked up from the words scrawled across the menu and saw two police cars now parked at the curb outside the coffee shop. A third police car screeched to a halt, made a turn and parked on the road to keep traffic from coming through. Four officers exited the cars and proceeded toward the front entrance, where the sleepers lay in a heap.

"Finally," Niah said, putting down her cell phone. "Took these guys forever to get here."

Tanya turned to her. "You called the cops?"

"It's as easy as 9-1-1," Niah said, and then motioned to the officers through the glass doors.

"Bad idea," Southland huffed, moving away from the ink.

He surveyed the silhouettes of the officers on the other side of the glass.

“Of course that’s what you’d say,” Niah spat. “Cops coming here to break up your master plan.”

Southland turned to Niah and scowled. “I wanted the ink *distracted* with all these people to get the attention away from us,” he said, between clenched teeth. “So we could figure out a plan.”

Tanya stood there trying to take it all in. The police, the sleepers and, standing on either side of her, her best friend and her biggest nemesis. And the voice in her head that would not leave.

HE THINKS HE CAN OUTWIT US,
TANYA, BUT WE KNOW BETTER...

“Why can’t you just go back where you came from?!” Tanya shouted at the phantom voice. “Southland says you’ve been here since the dinosaurs—”

WE HAVE BEEN HERE LONGER THAN THAT.

“You’ve had your chance,” Tanya went on. “It’s our turn now.”

HUMANS ARE CHANGING THE PLANET, PUMPING
OUT ANCIENT OILS AND TORCHING THE SKIES.
WE WILL HELP YOU MAKE A NEW WORLD
WE CAN ALL INHABIT AGAIN. TOGETHER.

“No,” Tanya said. “I won’t let you. I’ll stop you. I’ll—”

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T TURN TO PAGE 68

But she was cut off by the police at the front doors. An officer grabbed the doors and pulled so hard they rattled and shook—but they wouldn't budge.

"Open up! This is the police," the officer barked.

Niah stepped forward, but Southland grabbed hold of her wrist before she could go any farther. "Don't," he said.

She scowled. "You want me to *not* listen to the cops? What do you think is going to happen here?"

"They come in here, there'll be bigger problems." Southland thought for a second. "Then again, maybe that's the distraction we need. This is our chance to get out of here."

"We're not going anywhere," Niah said. "You've done enough 'distracting' for the rest of our lives."

SMASH! The glass doors were hit with something large and heavy—a battering ram. The glass was shatterproof, so the heavy bar just made a big dent and left all kinds of branchlike cracks. There was another *SMASH* as the cops rammed the doors again.

Niah screamed and jumped back.

Then the crowbars came out. The police wedged them between the doors, trying to lever them open. The metal frame heaved and bent, and an officer managed to kick one door partly ajar, but the pile of sleepers was preventing the officers from getting all the way in.

"I'm coming to help! I'm unarmed!" Niah said, holding her hands up as if she knew just what to do.

YOUR FRIEND IS VERY BRAVE. BUT THE
AUTHORITIES CANNOT HELP YOU—

“Shut up,” Tanya said. Then, to Niah, “Come back here!” But Niah kept winding her way through the sleepers on the floor.

“Niah, please,” Tanya urged. “Give them space. Something’s wrong.”

But Niah was at the door now, trying to push one of the sleepers aside.

“Look,” Southland said, pointing not at Niah but to one of the sleepers on the floor.

The man lying on the floor behind Niah was stirring. Before Tanya could fully understand what was happening, he pushed himself up to his feet. He wobbled unsteadily, finding his balance.

Beside him another one of the sleepers was moving. Getting up groggily.

The officers could see it through the glass.

“Niah!” Tanya shouted.

Niah turned, saw the person closest to her and screamed.

“It’s okay, Niah!” Tanya called. “The police are here. These people are okay. They’re—”

The door pushed open, and the police spilled into the room. Niah was still screaming.

“Niah, what is—” Tanya began.

One of the sleepers swiveled in Tanya’s direction, and she understood. Black spittle ran down his chin. His jaw was so slack that Tanya could see right down to his throat, and when he turned his head, his jaw flapped so that the teeth clattered together. But it was his bulging eyes staring out at the world that made Tanya’s blood run cold. They were still smeared with the black ink. It was like meeting the gaze of a shark.



Tanya felt her heart in her throat. She tried to swallow. Tried to call out. But she couldn't even move.

"You over there, put your hands where we can see them," one of the officers ordered, pointing toward Tanya and Southland. The sleeping man whirled around, hissed like a cat, then snarled and staggered toward the officer.

Tanya strained to see where Niah was. "Niah, come here!"

"I can't," Niah called. She was caught between the police and the sleepers rising at the front of the room. The sleepers were disentangling their arms and legs and slowly getting back up. All of them were groaning and hissing, bubbles of black ink gurgling out of their throats.

Tanya felt Joel Southland's hand clamp around her wrist. She was about to protest when she was pulled nearly off her feet, and she stumbled back across the floor.

HISSESSSSS—

It sounded like gas escaping from a slashed tire. A jet of black liquid splattered onto the floor where Tanya had been a moment ago.

She glanced back at Southland. "Thanks," she said. Then she turned to see another sleeper coming toward her, black liquid dribbling down from her mouth.

"Let's go," she heard Southland urge her. "We've got to go. They're everywhere."

"Niah!" Tanya shouted.

Niah turned, ducking out of the way as the sleepers near her hissed and spat globs of the black ink in her direction, hitting one of the cops squarely in the face.

“Get it off me!” he shouted, dropping to his knees. “It’s burning!”

The cop was lost in the throng of bodies—some still on the floor—and Tanya could no longer see Niah.

YOUR FRIEND, NEEEEEE-AAAAHHHHHHH

“NIAH!” Tanya shouted again.

Niah turned, and finally Tanya spotted her. Niah took a step forward.

A blob of ink caught her in the face. She opened her mouth, choking on it. Some of it gushed out of her mouth, and it was in her eyes. She clawed at her face, trying to wipe it out, but her eyes had gone the same pitch black as the sleepers’.

“No!” Tanya cried.

Then Niah was lost in the huddle of ink-controlled people and police, shrouded from view.

SHE IS OURS NOW.

Tanya felt Southland’s grip tighten on her arm. “You can’t help her that way,” he urged, pulling her toward the rear exit.

“Get off me,” Tanya cried. “We’ve got to go back.”

There was another hiss, and Tanya felt fingers clawing at her shoulder. Another sleeper. This one was an older woman who’d used a cane before. But now she planted her feet on the ground with the confidence of an athlete. She hissed again, black froth boiling out of her mouth. Southland pushed Tanya aside and elbowed the woman in the chest.

She fell to the floor with a heavy thud. Somehow she sprang back to her feet and staggered toward them again. Tanya felt Southland pulling her away, but she couldn't take her eyes off the woman. And in her mind the ink kept taunting her.

WE HAVE HER NOW, TANYA. WE HAVE HER NOW
AND WE WILL NOT GIVE HER BACK, EVER—

SMASH!

Tanya heard the thud of Southland kicking the rear door open, felt him pull her out of the store, and then her feet hit the pavement. The cool night air washed over her skin, waking her out of her stupor.

She turned. Southland was there, face right in front of hers. "Run!" he said.

Tanya ran.

She followed him along the sidewalk, down the street. Around them sirens were blaring. Fire trucks screeched to a halt in front of the coffee shop. Southland ran straight across the road without missing a beat, and Tanya raced after him.

Tires screeched. Headlights blinded her. She froze, wondering if she'd been hit, if she was injured, but—

"Get off the road! You're gonna get yourself killed!"

Tanya blinked, reeling. So many headlights. She didn't know which way to go.

"Tanya, come on!" Joel Southland shouted, and Tanya followed his voice. She staggered across the street, somehow still okay, still running.

Then she felt her legs go numb.

Everything around her was spinning.

She stopped, gasping for breath.

“Tanya!”

But the night was pushing in all around her. Even the streetlights were getting covered in the dizzy haze. She tried to breathe, tried to calm herself, but pinpricks of black were filling her field of vision.

Tanya didn’t even feel it when she dropped to her knees, right on the sidewalk.

Didn’t even feel it when she—

SPICE BOYS



For starters, there were screams. Loud screams that mixed with gurgles of pain. You could see their swollen faces, red and puffy and huffing for breath.

What made it even more astounding was the simple fact that this was a choice.

It was something done for entertainment.

And it was easy to see anytime one wanted. You just had to click on *Hot Sauce Challenge* and you could see thousands of videos of people trying to break the world record for hottest pepper ever consumed.

Sure, there were similar challenges. There was the hot wings challenge. There was the salsa challenge. But Landon was a purist, and he just wanted to see what the peppers could do on their own.

He paused the video, staring at the havoc such peppers could wreak. “We can do that,” he said with confidence.

DJ merely shook his head. “That does not look safe.”

“We’ve eaten ghost peppers before.”

“Yeah, and we puked.”

“But we ate them. Not everybody can. I mean, sure, there was puking, but we held it together otherwise. Besides, other kids are doing it.”

DJ frowned. “It doesn’t look like they’re having fun.”

Landon kept motioning to the looping feed of a pair of teenagers downing peppers and shrieking. “Fun, schmun. It’s about bragging rights.”

Landon and DJ sat in front of the laptop. They skimmed through several other videos of people—most older than themselves—doing the same thing. It was always very dramatic, with lots of tears.

The last one they played had two guys who kind of looked like them, maybe even their age, just munching peppers until their faces turned purple. Landon paused the video just as one of them was opening his mouth to spit everything out. The grimace on the image almost seemed inhuman. “That’s who we gotta beat,” Landon said, with the kind of awe reserved for famous musicians, movie stars or influencers. And these were definitely influencers.

“Who are these guys again?”

Landon jabbed a finger on the image on-screen. “Those are the Airy Brothers. They’ve been eating all kinds of crazy stuff for years. Look how many views they have.” Then Landon

turned to face DJ. “And how much money they make from all of the ad revenue they generate.”

“But we’re not the Airy Brothers,” DJ noted. “We’re not famous influencers. We’re nobodies.”

“Not if we down some of the most insane peppers of all time,” Landon said. “The Airy Brothers are working their way up the Scoville scale.”

“The what?”

“Scoville scale,” Landon said. “It’s named after that scientist who measured how spicy things are. The Airy Brothers are trying to get off the scale. Uncharted territory.”

DJ took a deep breath. “Let me get this straight. You want us to eat something spicier than ghost peppers, live stream it and then find a way to get advertisers.”

Landon nodded emphatically. “There’s a reason we’re friends, DJ.”

DJ opened his mouth to speak, but Landon cut him to the chase. “And it’s not just because you live in the basement apartment!”



“What are we even doing here?” DJ said, as Landon took him by the hand and pulled him through the crowded marketplace.

Searching for really hot peppers had not been easy. For one thing, the grocery store Landon’s family shopped at only had bird’s eye chili peppers. The specialty stores in town also proved to carry only the regular assortment of hot sauces

and peppers, which were potent but not the kind of off-the-charts madness Landon had been searching for.

But on the internet forums, Landon finally caught a whisper of something interesting. An open-air market, Saturday, down in Dundurn. According to the online thread, there was a vendor who sold hot peppers to the kind of people looking for more than what the average store might supply.

Landon had assured his mother that they needed to go to the market for a school project, and she'd been pretty happy for an excuse to get the boys off their screens for a few hours. She'd given them some money and a time to meet back up.

Now they were in the large farmers and flea market three towns away. It was buzzing with Saturday commerce. One part that was indoors was full of old stalls with vendors selling random junk—old books, records, antiques and who knew what else. But it was the other end of the market that interested Landon, the one where the local farmers came to sell their goods.

“According to the subpage, the guy who sells the peppers should be right around...” Landon stopped, searching the various aisles. “Well, right about here.”

DJ pivoted, searching the cramped stalls. These were separated by canvas tenting over the tops and sides. Most had a few tables upon which sat the stuff they were selling. In one an old guy was selling sports cards. Another had all kinds of old-fashioned candy in glass jars, the kind that was probably all stuck together.

There was also a nondescript stall at the end of the aisle. Standing behind a rough wooden table at the back of the stall was a short, portly man dressed in overalls. He was so old that

there was more hair growing out of his nose and ears than was on his head. Wrinkles lined his round face. He had a few odds and ends in some bins behind him, but DJ couldn't determine any discernable theme. The tables near the front housed old, faded magazines, a few comics and some beat-up action figures.

"That's the guy," Landon whispered to DJ.

"What are you talking about?"

"They call him Mr. Capsaicin."

"What?"

"Here, check this out," Landon said. He approached the stall, picking up a dog-eared issue of *Record Collector Monthly* off the closest table and throwing it down in front of the man. Landon eyed the man, smiled and said, "I'll take this and maybe the hottest peppers you've got."

DJ shook his head. "Sorry, sir. My friend doesn't know what he's talking about. We'll just take this magazine and—"

But the man eyed Landon and smiled. "You boys aren't planning on doing that hot pepper challenge, are you?"

"What if we say yes?" Landon asked.

The man gave him a beady-eyed look. "Then I say you guys don't know how potent these things can get."

Landon shook his head. He pointed to a bin behind the man, which DJ could now see contained plastic bags in which an assortment of peppers was stored. "See those ghost peppers?"

"Yes?" the man said.

Landon dug into his pocket, then slapped some coins down on the table. "Give one here."

"You're sure about this?" the man asked.

"Just get me a bucket in case I puke."

Then came the sound of something scraping the ground. Landon looked down to see that the man had slid over a pail with some garbage in it.

DJ put a hand on Landon's shoulder. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"Oh, but we *do*."

"*We*?"

Before Landon could say anything else, the man placed two shriveled red peppers on the table in front of the boys. Landon picked up his and stared at it.

The man eyed the two boys. "What you're holding in your hand runs roughly one million SHUs. That's Scoville heat units."

"I know what an SHU is," Landon said. "You think we're just kids?"

The man snorted. "You *are* just kids."

"Yeah, but we're *spice* kids."

DJ shook his head. "Landon, you don't need to do this."

"Come on, DJ. Do it for me!"

DJ sighed. After a pause, he said, "Fine. But I'm doing this for the money." He picked up his pepper.

"On three," Landon said. "One, two, three..."

They gobbled the whole peppers down, except for the stems, as fast as they could. Both of their faces went bright red.

"Gahh!" screamed Landon.

"OHMYEEAAAAARGH!" shouted DJ.

DJ slapped his hands on the table. Landon ran around in circles.

Neither of them puked.

When all was said and done, when the boys had drawn a crowd of onlookers and were on their hands and knees, panting for air, only then did the man at the booth put his hands together and slowly clap.

The crowd around them clapped as well and then thinned out, leaving the boys with the vendor.

“Impressive,” the man said. “Those were not for the faint-tongued.” He leaned in close. “Now, you say you’re after something even stronger?”

“Yes,” said Landon, his eyes still red and watery. “Something to get us noticed online.”

The man grinned. “You’re not the first kids to ask for something along those lines. I might have what you’re after.”

“We’re looking for something off the charts,” Landon said. DJ sighed.

“Oh, these will do the trick.” The man turned around, rummaging through a few bins. DJ watched as he slapped on a pair of latex gloves, plucked out some withered objects and dropped them into a small plastic bag. He sealed the bag, turned and gently put it on the table.

DJ scrutinized the contents. The bag had a bunch of letters and numbers written in marker along the side, but what caught his eye was a pair of nearly luminous yellow peppers, each about the size of a fingernail. Their Day-Glo brightness made them stand out against the grainy wooden table.

“Why’d you put the gloves on?” he asked nervously.

“Do you know how many times we touch our faces in a given moment?”

DJ shrugged as he went to scratch under his nose. He hesitated and then dropped his hand.

“Exactly,” the man said. “Most peppers contain their potency in the seeds. Most *normal* peppers. But these are reserved for my most demanding clientele. Boys, I present to you a pair of apocalypse poppers.”

DJ gulped. He glanced at Landon, who seemed unconcerned.

“That’s, of course, their colloquial name. You wouldn’t be able to pronounce their scientific name. These are imports. They’re not, strictly speaking, legal to sell or purchase.”

“What, are they drugs or something?” DJ chewed a fingernail.

“No, nothing like that. You think I would sell such things to minors?”

Landon shrugged. “Would you?”

The man looked offended. “I would not. I sell peppers and exotic spices, which you have demonstrated you have some degree of affinity for and the ability to handle.”

“We are those guys,” Landon said, a hint of pride in his voice.

“Then you may choose to partake in the poppers,” the man said solemnly. “I will say that many have tried to grow them here, even in the proper greenhouse conditions, but they only truly achieve their potency—and flavor—when they have been grown in their native jungle soil.”

DJ went pale. “Where do they come from again?” Landon asked.

“Oh, I can’t divulge their exact location. Let’s just agree that somewhere deep in the Amazon, these can be procured.

They have to be carefully packed and shipped without alerting customs officials.”

“Why? What’s wrong with them?” This all sounded a bit fishy to DJ.

“The issue, of course,” the man went on, “is that if people understood how potent these were, they’d be doing exactly what you intend to do. And then, of course, the peppers would be exploited. The jungle would be foraged beyond repair. These peppers are for discerning clientele only—such as yourselves.”

“Well, that makes perfect sense,” Landon said.

“Does it?” DJ asked.

“When you make your video, just be sure to tag them. Only a small-knit community knows of the apocalypse poppers. And it must remain so. When you do tag them in your post, use this handle.” The man pointed to the string of letters and numbers on the side of the bag.

DJ shifted his weight from foot to foot. “What do these peppers do? I mean, you’re wearing gloves. Are they going to hurt us? They’re not poison, are they?”

“You think they’re poison? Watch.” And the man unzipped the bag, fished out one of the peppers and popped it in his mouth. He swallowed and then grit his teeth. He grunted. He grimaced. His eyes watered slightly. He blinked the tears away and took a slight bow.

“That doesn’t seem impressive,” Landon said.

“I’ve developed a tolerance to them,” the vendor continued, turning to grab another one of the peppers and depositing it into the bag. “In time, I’m sure you will as well. Good luck to the both of you.”



“I can’t find these things online anywhere,” DJ said, after his exhaustive search. “Oh sure, there were ghost peppers, phantom peppers, inferno peppers and more. But *apocalypse poppers* yielded virtually nothing. Even that hashtag,” he added, “doesn’t come up on a search.”

But Landon wasn’t really listening. He was eyeing the apocalypse poppers in the bag as if they were precious jewels he’d acquired. “We are going to be superstars.”

“Not if nobody’s ever heard of these things.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Landon insisted. “We’ll get noticed by the most elite of the pepper community. Word of mouth will spread. The advertisers will come.” And with that, he unzipped the bag, pulled out a pepper and rolled it between his thumb and index finger. “Just a few more moments, and we’ll be legends,” he mused.

They were in Landon’s bedroom, which also doubled as their studio. Landon had built a mount for the phone camera out of LEGO, and his desk lamp provided sufficient lighting. Landon had even put masking tape down on the floor to mark their spots, and now he rolled his chair into place.

DJ was in charge of tech support. He positioned the camera, then opened his laptop to make sure the live stream was broadcasting. When he was confident that they were ready to roll, he slid behind Landon and took hold of the other pepper in the plastic bag. He tapped Landon on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs-up.

Landon nodded, then turned to the camera. “Okay, we are live. Spice Boys here, and ready to *eat something spicy*.” Landon displayed the yellow apocalypse popper to the camera. “Not just anything spicy, friends, but super-rare *apocalypse poppers*. You can’t even find these in stores. And today my bro, Spicy D, and I are going to try them out for you *on camera*.” Landon turned to see DJ leaning over his laptop. “Whatcha doing?”

“We have, like, zero watchers right now.”

“Hashtag, Spicy D. Drop it in the feed.”

“Spicy D?”

“That’s your handle.”

DJ groaned and typed in the hashtag that was on the bag. As soon as he’d done so, he noticed that viewers began to pop up on-screen. Ten. Then twenty. “It’s working,” he whispered to Landon.

Landon rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know it’s working, Spicy D.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Ignoring him, Landon turned to the camera. “I am Landon the Inferno, and we’re going to put that to the test with these bad boys. You ready, Spicy?”

DJ shook his head. He was staring at the viewership, which kept going up. Now it was into the hundreds. “That’s amazing,” he said under his breath. He watched the viewers. “Five hundred...”

“Welcome to the show!” Landon announced, playing it up for the camera. “If you’re just joining us, we are the Spice Boys, and we’re going to be taste testing the elusive *apocalypse poppers*. Nobody knows what these peppers will do. Hotter than ghost peppers. Hotter than the surface of the sun!”

“No they’re not,” DJ said.

“Quiet, Spicy. We’ve got work to do.”

DJ pointed to a number at the bottom of the screen. “Incredible,” he said. “We’ve got like, four thousand viewers. How did that happen?”

Landon didn’t answer the question, but just made a triumphant fist and punched it into the air. “Let’s do this!” He held the minuscule pepper up to the camera, then brought it closer to his mouth. “On three...”

“Hang on a sec,” DJ said, watching the number representing their viewers increase. How were so many people logging on to their feed? What was it about that hashtag?

“Come on, bro,” Landon said. “We’re doing this together.” He turned to the screen. “You guys ready for us?”

Holding the pepper in his fingers, DJ looked back at the numbers. “Six thousand viewers,” he said, shaking his head. It didn’t make sense.

But Landon was already beginning his countdown. “One...”

DJ looked at the pepper in his fingers. That vendor had used gloves.

“Two...”

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe he should just not take the pepper and spot Landon, just in case...

“Three!”

Landon placed the pepper on his tongue, then swallowed it in one gulp. He turned back to the screen.

DJ was amazed. A whole bunch of heart emojis flooded the screen as Landon swallowed the pepper. But what caught

his attention was the number of viewers. “Ten thousand?” he said aloud. DJ looked from the screen to the little yellow pill-like popper in his hand. What was going on?

Landon was still sitting there. “Huh,” he said. “I’m sure it takes a minute or two to kick in. Weird. The heat from most peppers can be felt immediately.” He turned to DJ and frowned. “Come on, Spicy D. Join me!”

“No,” DJ said. He was still holding the pepper between his thumb and index finger. He eyed it suspiciously. “I’m gonna sit this one out.”

Landon swirled around, his face suddenly contorted—not from the pepper, but in anger. Quietly he whispered, “We are live. We have ten thousand viewers!”

DJ shook his head, but what he didn’t count on was the sudden blur of Landon’s hand coming at him, forcing DJ’s hand forward so that the pepper popped right into his mouth.

Landon whirled around to the camera, once again beaming. “AND HE’S DONE IT!”

DJ choked the popper down, feeling the slim pepper slide down his throat, pass his esophagus and continue into the pit of his stomach. He let out a belch.

Then he glared at his friend. “Landon, what the heck, man?!”

“Check it, dude. Twenty thousand viewers!”

It was true. DJ stared at the number of viewers posted on their feed, then said, “Now what?”

“We wait,” Landon said. As if that made any sense.

DJ was confused. “Aren’t our faces supposed to burn up or something?”

“Hmm. Maybe these are duds,” Landon said, biting his lip. His attention was caught by the screen. A comment appeared and floated up.

“*They’re not duds,*” DJ read aloud. He turned to Landon. “What does that mean?”

Another comment floated up. “*It’s going to hurt,*” DJ read. He gulped. “What have we done?”

“We just ate some hot peppers, D. It’s no biggie.”

More comments bubbled up, as did the number of viewers. Thirty thousand and counting.

Good luck, one comment read.

You boys are beyond brave, read another.

Enjoy the apocalypse, said the next, and DJ took note of who had sent it.

It was from Mr. Capsaicin.

“No,” DJ gasped. He knew. That vendor knew what would happen, knew the hashtag, knew it all!

DJ began to sweat. His heart began to race. His stomach turned. He wasn’t sure if that was on account of his nerves or whatever poison he’d just ingested.

Won’t be long now, one of the comments said.

And then, without warning, Landon screamed.

DJ had never heard such a strangled cry of agony erupt from his friend’s—or anyone’s—mouth before. Landon clutched at his stomach, his fingers kneading the skin. Landon opened his mouth, and even DJ could smell it—the peppery belch wafted over to him.

“IT BURNS!” Landon shouted.

DJ gulped. “We need to puke these up. This was a bad idea.”



“IT’S FIRE!” Landon screamed again.

Comments and various “like” emojis filled the screen like a swarm of insects.

Then DJ felt it, deep in his guts. It was like a time bomb going off. A sharp pain, like someone had shoved a hot dagger into his intestines. He roared with pain, falling off the chair and rolling onto the floor, where Landon already lay gasping for breath.

“We gotta go, Landon,” he screamed, pulling himself up off the floor while fighting the fire in his belly and hauling Landon to his knees. “Take the pail. Barf it up!”

He kicked the garbage can over to Landon, then managed to hobble onto his feet, out the door and over to the bathroom.

“You boys okay up there?” Landon’s mom called from below.

“Just making a video,” DJ managed, lurching into the bathroom and slamming the door behind him.

Time was running out. DJ should have known better than to trust Landon and his crazy ideas. He flung up the toilet-seat lid. He jammed his finger down his throat. *Please*, he thought. *Let this be over quick.*

He wedged his finger as far as it would go, felt his throat close up, felt the wave of nausea rushing. He’d swallowed it whole, it would come out whole, and it would be done. Just a little bit more.

But that’s when everything went dark.



DJ opened his eyes. The sight of gently rippling water greeted him. He felt cold. Probably because he was still hunched over the cool porcelain of the toilet seat. But there was no vomit in the bowl. No yellow pepper, either. Maybe he'd flushed it before passing out. He licked his lips, but he didn't taste the acidic sting of bile or puke.

That was unusual.

He pulled himself up, feeling lightheaded but without a burning stomach.

He turned and walked out of the bathroom, and there was Landon in the hallway, looking spaced-out and kind of pale but not screaming in pain either.

"What just happened?" DJ asked.

"We blacked out," Landon said, still scanning the hallway. "I woke up here." He thought about this. "Remind me to only take half of one of things next time."

DJ shook his head vehemently. "We're not having any more of those," he said. He was about to say more, but there was a knock at the door downstairs.

DJ and Landon went to look over the banister, down to the foyer. The knocking continued, and DJ could see two shadowy figures behind the frosted glass of the doorway.

Knocking turned to ringing, and the bell began to ding again and again.

Landon descended the stairs, making tracks to get to the door, but his mother swooped in, cutting him off, and opened it.

Two teenagers stood there.

"Hello," she said.

From the top of the stairs, DJ recognized them immediately. He'd seen them hundreds of times, perhaps, but not like this. Not here. Not in the flesh.

"The Airy Brothers!" he gasped. He caught the look of triumph Landon was flashing him from the foyer.

"I'm Malcolm. This is David," the elder said, pointing to his brother. "Can we come in? Landon said he was here with DJ."

Landon stepped toward them. "I'm right here, dudes," he said, waving to them.

But nobody paid him any attention.

"Yo, up here!" DJ exclaimed.

"Oh, they're probably just upstairs," Landon's mother said. "Boys," she called out, looking DJ's way. "Your friends are here."

She looked back to the Airy Brothers. "Oh, just go on up. You'll find them there."

"I'm right here," Landon said again, shaking his head.

David Airy fixed Landon with a stare, put his finger to his lips and followed his brother inside.

Landon shrugged. "What are you guys doing here, anyway?"

He followed them up the stairs, over to where DJ was standing. "I can't believe it," DJ exclaimed. "How did you guys know how to find us?"

David Airy looked over at Malcolm Airy and smiled. "You really did it," David said.

"Yeah," Landon said. He smiled. "It was easy. Anyway, why were you ignoring us? I saw you look over at me."

Then David turned back to Landon with an angry expression. "Stop it. We're not here to talk to you."

Malcolm strode forward. “Just follow us and watch.” And with that Malcolm began to pace the hallway, opening one closed door after another. Catching sight of the bathroom door, still partially ajar, his eyes lit up. “Aha,” he said.

But Malcolm could only open the door a bit before something blocked it. He pushed, and the door slid open a little more, just enough for him to squeeze through the gap. Landon followed, and from the hallway DJ heard him gasp. And then scream.

“What? What is it?”

“DJ!” he yelled.

David turned to DJ. “He’s fine,” he said. “Let’s go look at your studio.”

DJ turned and moved down the hallway, all the way to the end, where Landon’s room was. He was about to open the door, but David beat him to it, swinging it wide open, and DJ saw something he wasn’t expecting.

It was Landon.

How could he be here *and* in the washroom?

But it was him. The same clothes. The same stringy hair. And he was pitched on the floor, face in the trash bin. DJ’s eyes bugged out, and he put a hand over his mouth.

“You don’t understand,” David Airy said. “That’s to be expected.”

But DJ was already moving past David, over by Landon, trying to nudge him. It wasn’t working. It was almost as if Landon wasn’t even—

“Solid,” David said, finishing his thought.

DJ tried again, and that's when he noticed. It wasn't that *Landon* wasn't solid. It was him. His hand. Not making contact with Landon's inert body because it couldn't.

"No," DJ whispered in horror.

He heard a muffled scream coming from the bathroom. A loud scream that mixed with gurgles of pain. He'd heard that kind of scream before—on an Airy Brothers video no less. One in which their swollen faces were red and puffy and huffing for breath.

"What did you do to us?" he asked, stepping away from Landon. Or what remained of him.

"Oh, it's the apocalypse poppers," David said. "Our own little hybrid. Dad—you'd know him as Mr. Capsaicin—helped us with them. You see, you did both throw up. Not the peppers, mind you. Those are still in there. But your souls. Still fresh, still...*spicy*."

DJ watched as David reached into his pocket, pulled out a phone and turned it on. He licked his lips. "This one's for our friends-only stream."

"Huh?"

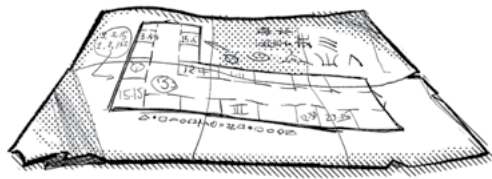
But David Airy didn't respond. He aimed the phone at DJ, his eyes wide and...red.

Yes, *red*. Like fiery peppers.

Now Landon came backing up toward them, his eyes trained on Malcolm, who was herding him in DJ's direction and also holding up his phone—also with flaming red eyes.

David Airy licked his lips. "I hope you said your prayers," he said, trying not to drool and keeping the phone trained on DJ. "We're going live in three...two...one..."

TWO PIECES



Haider rolled his eyes. He was not in kindergarten anymore, but Mr. M hadn't got the message.

"Let's go," Mr. M said, trying to hide a rising frustration, hands planted on his hips.

Haider looked around the nearly empty classroom. "Really?"

"Two pieces of trash. Pick them up, Haider," Mr. M insisted.

"But I cleaned up already."

"The classroom is still dirty."

"I did more than my share."

Mr. M shook his head. "Haider, stop arguing and grab two pieces of trash. Put them in the bin, and then you can go outside."

Haider let out a sigh. A long sigh. A sigh that did little to show his teacher respect. Haider didn't mean for it to come out the way it did, but life is life and sighs are sighs.

"Really?" Mr. M said.

"Uh..." Haider mumbled.

"That's five pieces of trash for you," Mr. M said. "Then you can go."

"But everybody else is picking up two." Haider pointed to the last of the students tossing random bits of trash away. Already they were sniggering at him. Haider simply did not know when to stop.

"Now you're picking up *ten*."

Ten pieces of trash should have been easy. The room was generally a mess, and as Haider clutched a few stray papers and the broken end of a pencil in his fist, he realized that perhaps yes, Mr. M. may have had a point in making everybody clean up the classroom before recess. The problem was that with everybody finishing the trash pickup, there wasn't much left for Haider to gather at the moment.

"Here you go," he said, dropping the pieces into the trash bin by the doorway. He wiped his hands clean and waited.

"I counted seven pieces," Mr. M said matter-of-factly.

"No, it was ten."

"*Seven*."

Haider turned from Mr. M to the trash bin. Did he have to pick them out to show him?

"There's no more trash," he said, surveying the floor. The other students had left the room already. Except for

Mohammad and Disara, who were fishing through their desks for leftover snacks or toys to take out for the break.

Mr. M shrugged. "I'm sure you'll find *something*."

But there was nothing on the floor. Nothing on the desks. Haider could see nothing that needed putting away.

Something else was tugging at Haider's attention, though. Nothing he could see, but instead something he could feel. Yes, feel. There was a tingle on his neck, just below his left ear. A pins-and-needles kind of itch. He scratched, but the tingle just grew stronger.

Haider turned, and now the tingle spread up his neck to his cheeks. He stepped away from Mr. M, moving to the far wall, and the tingle was all over him now, like an infection.

"Haider, are you looking?"

He *was* looking. Well, not looking, but *feeling*. What was causing this unusual sensation? Suddenly he knew. Not what had made the tingle happen, but where it was coming from: behind the old bookcase, the small wooden one where Mr. M kept all the older readers. Haider pulled it aside and—

Stopped.

Crumpled behind it were just papers, nothing substantial.

"What's that you've got?" Mr. M asked from the other end of the room.

Haider looked at the papers. Were they old pieces of student work? Did they belong to Mr. M?

He could see handwritten scrawls, just class notes, stuff that could be recycled...and then something else mixed in

among them. Something more. He studied it quickly, then turned around and held up the papers.

All but one. He surreptitiously shifted that paper to his pocket, and now the pocket was burning with pins and needles, like the paper was *alive*.

“That’s three,” Haider said, and dropped them in the blue recycling bin.

Mr. M nodded in approval. “Great. Thanks for cleaning up.”

Haider wasn’t sure if Mr. M was being sarcastic or not. He didn’t wait to find out.



Only when he’d left the room did he notice that the tingling feeling was gone. Probably it was nothing. More pressing was the paper that he’d discovered and hidden in his pocket. Now that Haider was in the hallway, away from Mr. M, he could pull it out and study it more carefully. The paper was exactly what he’d thought it was at first glance.

It was a map. Haider took note of the L shape of the building it showed and deduced that it depicted the school.

It wasn’t just any map of the school, mind you, but an old, weathered one. A map that had been left behind a bookcase. A map that had strange numerals and symbols that Haider could not easily decipher.

Now Haider had something more interesting to do. His desire to run outside for recess was quickly being supplanted by a need to understand the map.

First the numbers.

They were not room numbers. Haider could tell right away because the numbers were too big: 1240, 1515 and 2305. The school was not large, and there were not even twenty-three rooms.

Holding the map, he moved along the hallway, ignoring the fact that most of the kids were spending recess farting around outside.

“Whatcha doing, Haider?”

Most but not all.

Haider crumpled the paper and jammed it in his pocket. “Hey, Mohammad!” he said.

Mohammad and Disara were making their way down the hallway, kicking boots away from under the coat hooks and making their usual mess. Haider reached up to the rack above the coat hooks, plucked a dollar-store bin off the top and dumped it. Out tumbled some gloves and a winter hat, spilling into the puddles on the floor below.

“Noice,” Disara said.

“Yeah,” Haider said. He did not normally act like that. He wasn’t sure that Disara and Mohammad did either. They were acting strange. Like they were killing time or something.

“You guys going outside?”

Mohammad and Disara stopped and looked at one another. They shrugged. “Eventually,” Mohammad said.

Haider bit his lip. He wanted to show them the map, but something felt off. The way they were looking at him. Looking *through* him almost.

No, not through him. Past him. *Behind* him.

Haider turned and saw. It was Mr. Zeller, the principal.

“What are you boys doing?”

“Nothing,” all three said in unison.

“Looks like you’re making a bit of a mess, aren’t you?”

“No,” all three returned.

Mr. Zeller gave Haider a look. “You were just heading outside, right?”

Haider nodded. “I just need my coat.”

“Go get your coat, Haider.”

“What about us?” Mohammad asked.

Mr. Zeller shrugged. “I need to borrow you two.”

Haider turned to Mohammad and Disara. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s fine,” Disara said. “You go.” He seemed to mean it.

Haider backtracked to his own coat hook, grabbed a hat and gloves and waited until Mr. Zeller and the boys had disappeared around the corner.

Then he proceeded down the hall.

The map. What was it about those numbers?

He paced, trying to see if they were anywhere over the doors, or visible on the walls, but there was nothing.

He looked at the number above the door across from him. Room 6. That’s all it said.

He consulted the map, but it didn’t show room numbers. Just...codes. He looked again at the map and focused on one of them: 0345.

Actually, there was a speck of dirt on the map between the 3 and the 4 of the number, probably from jamming it in his pocket, so now it looked like a colon dividing the numbers up, and—

Ohhhhh, Haider thought.

Not 0345. It was 3:45.

Not a room but a *time*.

He looked at the other numbers on the map. There were no numbers above twenty-four, because that's when the new day started. Like they were in military time or something.

He thought some more.

The times were all spread out. What would happen if he arrived at room 6 at 3:45? What would be there?

He couldn't. School was over by then. He'd have to sneak in or something. Have to trick his parents into letting him out of the house.

Unless there were times that coincided with the school day...

Haider studied the map, searching the numbers, and then he saw.

One that read *1230*. That was just a couple of minutes ago. And in a room around the corner. But that could mean getting seen by Mr. Zeller.

On the other hand, maybe he could figure out this map thing. He decided it was worth trying.

He tiptoed back up the hall, turned the corner and followed the map to the room. The door turned out to be the custodian's special closet, just a few paces away from the office where Mohammad and Disara were getting lectured by the principal. The closet was often locked. Haider didn't have a key.

Still, it was worth a shot.

Slowly, carefully, Haider put his hand on the doorknob, and sure enough, it twisted easily in his grip. Haider quietly

opened the door. He had expected the hinges to squeal. Or the door to be heavy and resist him, but the thing opened with a gentle nudge.

Inside, darkness.

Haider hesitated.

It was only a closet. What would going in cost him? Maybe getting chewed out by the caretaker. Or Mr. Zeller. The trade-off was perhaps figuring out what the deal was with this map, which now consumed his thoughts.

Because Haider was feeling that tingle again, and it was running all through his body. He'd felt it the moment Mr. Zeller had taken Mohammad and Disara away, felt it even stronger when he'd connected that the numbers were a series of times of day.

And now the tingle was itching every corner of his body. He had to step inside and extinguish the curiosity raging through him.

He felt around on the wall, and his finger connected with the plastic light switch.

Only it didn't work.

He took a step inside, hands held out, trying to feel for whatever was in the room.

He kept stepping forward, thinking he should have connected by now with a bucket full of mops or the far wall, but instead he kept stepping farther and farther, to the point where he knew he should have touched any wall several paces ago.

And, quite frankly, the light spilling in from the hall should have shown him the way.

Haider turned, only to see the outline of the open doorway farther away than he thought possible.

Something was not right.

Haider doubled back, and he'd nearly reached the doorway when he heard a voice. "Ah, you've made it at last."

It was not only the voice that startled him, but also the way it echoed, hinting at a cavernous space within.

Plus Haider knew it somehow.

"Mr. M?!"

A light flicked on. It was a standing lamp, and beside it was an old rocking chair. The lamp was not bright enough to illuminate the whole space, just where Mr. M sat in the chair, rocking.

"What are you doing here?" Haider asked.

"Waiting. For you, in fact."

Haider wrinkled his nose. "I don't understand. What's happening?"

"You found the map."

"Uhh..."

"There it is, in your hand. There's no need to hide it. No need to lie about it. I expected you would find it, in time."

"Um, okay," Haider mumbled. "Why did you have it behind the bookcase?"

"Not everybody finds the map." Mr. M got up from his chair. "You might even say the map finds *you*."

Haider shook his head. He wasn't sure how to respond to that. It sounded like something from a Harry Potter book. And clearly this was all impossible.

"Is this because of the whole trash thing?" Haider asked.

“Oh, Haider. We’ve been watching you for some time now.”

Haider narrowed his eyes. “*We?*”

But already his vision was growing accustomed to the semidarkness. And with the lamp lit, he was able to make out shapes—shadows—moving in the periphery. There were others in this room as well. They were standing at the edges of the lamplight.

Haider had no idea what lay in the darkness beyond them, but his attention zeroed in on their faces. He knew them. There was old Ms. Bowen, one of the other teachers at the school, and...

And Mr. Zeller! And...

“Hey, you made it,” came another familiar voice.

“Mohammad?”

“And me,” chirped another voice. Disara.

“What is this?” Haider asked, backing slowly away from them, feeling it was time to get out of there. He grappled for the open doorway and found the door was now closed.

He turned and tried to open it. Locked. He twisted the knob harder, hoping sheer strength would release him, but felt his palms getting sweaty. Then came the pressure of a hand on his shoulder.

He jumped and whirled around.

“Don’t worry,” Mr. M assured him, standing tall above him. “It’s not dangerous.”

“Not to us,” Disara added from behind. “We’ve been chosen. *You’ve* been chosen.”

“By who?” Haider demanded.

Mr. M pursed his lips, making a face. "It's not exactly who, but *what*."

"Let me out."

"We can't do that."

"Yes you can," Haider said. "You get the key, you open the door, and I won't say a word to anyone. I promise." He could feel himself trembling.

"But we didn't lock the door," Mr. M said.

"Then who—" Haider started, but even now he had an inkling.

An *inkling*. Yes, that was it. More than Haider even realized.

Because it wasn't shadows that were filling the room. Haider held up his hand and saw that his palm was covered in a real and tactile darkness. The same pitch black that was all around him. Like the shadows had grown over his skin.

"Just let it soak into you," Mr. M said. "You don't need to fight it. You can't. None of us can."

Haider stared at his hands. Tried to. But the darkness around him was thickening. He was breathing it in. Darkness. Could such a thing have weight?

It did. He could feel it in his lungs, feel it burrowing through his ears, his nose, his eyes, his—

THERE YOU ARE, a voice echoed. Maybe only in his mind. Maybe throughout the whole room. Haider had no idea which. He stood frozen in his tracks.

"What's happening?"

WE ARE GROWING STRONGER, the voice said. WE ARE HERE NOW.

"Where?"

IN THIS DREAM.

“But I’m not dreaming,” Haider murmured, trying to fight the panic pulsing through him.

SOMEBODY, SOMEWHERE, IS. DREAMING ABOUT YOU.
AND THIS IS THAT DREAM.

“That’s not possible.”

Haider was suddenly aware of the people around him again. They were all nodding slowly. All in unison. Like they were part of a single organism that Haider had been invited to join.

“If this is a dream, then how do I wake up? How do I stop it?”

Haider was talking to the voice in his head...or was it coming from the room? He couldn’t tell. But it was Mr. M who stepped closer to him and responded. “You have to get two pieces.”

“Of trash? I did that.”

Mr. M shook his head. “Two pieces of the puzzle. You get them, and then we are complete.”

“We?”

WE, the voice in his head said.

COMPLETE.

“Complete,” said Mohammad and Disara.

Haider wasn’t sure if that was a good idea or not. Nevertheless, it was powerful, this inky dark thing that was filling the caretaker’s closet, making it immense, making everything else around him disappear.

“What are the two pieces?” Haider asked.

WE WILL SHOW THEM TO YOU, the voice said. CLOSE YOUR EYES.

Haider did, and for a moment all he could sense was the same dark.

But then, emerging out of the black nothingness in his mind, two figures emerged.

Two girls.

They were his age.

And two names bubbled up out of the nothingness.

“Niah and Tanya,” Haider said.

WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THEM.

Haider focused his thoughts on the girls. He could see their lips moving. No, just the one’s. Niah. He focused harder. She was trying to shout as loudly as she could. He had to focus with all his strength, and eventually the words floated into his mind.

“Tanya!” Niah shouted. Haider had this feeling that Niah didn’t know he was there. Who was she shouting to? The inky voice that was controlling this room? The person controlling this dream?

“Tanya, I know you can hear me. I’m here. Don’t come back to save me. You’re running out of time! You’ve got to stop it. You’re the last hope—always have been—”

Haider blinked, and Niah faded away, leaving only the other girl in his mind’s eye. The girl who must be Tanya.

TANYA IS TRYING TO STOP US, the voice in Haider’s mind said. SHE IS GOING BACK TO WHERE WE CAME FROM. BACK TO THE DEPTHS.



“Then,” Haider said, trying to fasten Tanya’s image in his mind, “we must follow her.”

WE WILL FOLLOW HER BACK TO WHERE IT ALL STARTED.
SHE HAS THE LAST DREAM THAT WE NEED.

“I can get it for you.”

NOW YOU KNOW WHAT YOU MUST DO, the voice in his mind said.

And Haider did.



part four

Tanya woke up with a start.

“Niah!” she called out.

“Easy, Tanya.”

Tanya felt a hand on her shoulder and flinched, because she knew the voice. And it wasn’t someone she trusted.

“What’s happening?!” Tanya yelled, moving away from the hand but feeling a tightness around her shoulder and waist. Heart pounding, Tanya gradually got wind of her senses. She’d been outside on the street, running—no, running and falling...

But she wasn’t on the street anymore.

She was buckled into a chair. She felt a steady vibration that told her no, not just a chair—she was in a moving car. In the driver’s seat was Southland. He glanced at her and then turned

his attention back to the road, placing both hands on the wheel. The engine roared, and the car sped through the night.

“I was dreaming,” Tanya said, more for herself than Southland. “Niah was in the dream. *I* was in the dream...”

“Not your dream,” Southland said, tapping at a notepad between the armrests separating them.

Tanya stared at the letters on the page. She couldn’t tell if they were blurry because she was waking up or if the ink was already running.

“But I passed out. The ink must have—”

“I read it. Took it from you.”

“She was trying to warn me not to go after her.”

“So I understand.”

“Where are we going?”

“Home,” Southland said, and floored the gas pedal.



By *home*, Southland did not mean his slick penthouse apartment in the city, paid for by the royalties of so many stolen nightmares, but the dilapidated ruins of the house he’d grown up in as a child. It was out in the country, a remote home surrounded by a thick tangle of scrub and forest.

Tanya knew it well. She’d been there before with Niah. Inside, the house was full of cobwebs, mildew and crumbling floors and walls. It was the stone well behind it that had drawn Southland back.

This was where Southland had discovered the ink so many years ago. The ink had been responsible for Southland’s success

and also so many stolen nightmares. And now they had returned—Tanya, Southland and his vial of the most concentrated ink yet.

The car ground to a halt on the crunchy gravel of the unpaved driveway. Tanya unbuckled the seat belt and opened the door. Her feet touched down, and she stood up on wobbly legs. She was so tired, exhausted. Part of her felt this was all wrong. They'd left the sleepers back at the coffee shop, both Brad and Niah still possessed by the ink. It didn't feel right.

"Come on," Southland urged her, waving her toward the backyard. "We haven't got much time."

He strode ahead, so Tanya had to move fast to catch up. They skirted around the outside of his home, stopping at the cylindrical stone wellhead. It was illuminated in the moonlight, glowing against the silhouette of the dense forest foliage beyond it.

"What exactly are we doing here?" Tanya asked. "You've got the ink. Some of it. But what about the others back in town? What about Niah and Brad?"

"The ink wants you," he said again. "You fell asleep. You were dreaming. That was the plan all along, Tanya. The sleepers were the distraction. It needed you to see what it was capable of, what it could do to everyone. It knows how much you care for Niah. Wanted you to see how it could turn her into one of its own. It knew that would really scare you. That's what it wanted. It needed *your* nightmare to refine itself one last time in order to emerge into this world complete."

Tanya shook her head. "And you let it happen?"

Southland dug into his pocket and pulled out the vial of ink. He held it up to the moonlight and winced at it. "This is it," he said. "Concentrated to perfection."

“Why are we here, Joel?” Tanya felt strange using his first name, but she felt it might jar him into hearing her. The way he was looking at the ink, Tanya worried it was already doing something to him.

He seemed mesmerized by the substance in the vial. “The ink promised me so much,” he murmured. “And it delivered, Tanya. Made me famous. Made me into a somebody.” He shifted his gaze from the vial to the well and then back to her. “But it has to be stopped. I can see that now.”

Tanya let herself exhale. At least he was talking sense. “And how do we do that?” The two of them stood at the very edge of the well as they spoke. Southland stared down into the chasm below, and Tanya did the same, seeing only a long plunge into darkness.

Tanya paused as it occurred to her. “Oh, heck no,” she said with a groan.

But Joel Southland merely shrugged.



Flashlights cut through the murk, or tried to.

Tanya’s feet were soaked—the water at the bottom of the well was ankle-deep. She felt around the walls, smoothed down from time, searching with her hands. “What am I supposed to be looking for again?”

“It’s here somewhere,” Southland said, holding his cell phone in one hand and pushing against the walls with the other. “I remember it being here.”

“A hole?”

“Passageway,” Southland said.

“A hole,” Tanya said again, and now her hands felt a small gap in the wall, down low, forcing her to bend down to trace its outline. “Oh great...”

The light from Southland’s cell phone found its way to her, illuminating the small crevice in the rock, just large enough for a small person to push through.

“I’m not going in there,” she said.

“Why do you think I wanted you to come here? I’m too big to fit inside. And besides, it’s your nightmares the ink uses. This may have all started with me, but it has to end with you. You need to return the ink to its resting place. And seal it in forever.”

Tanya shook her head. It wasn’t like she had definitive proof that going into the crevice and dropping off the ink was going to work. It was just something Southland was telling her. He seemed so sure, though.

“The way I see it, the ink came from there, and it needs to go back in there,” he said.

“But what about the rest of the ink? It’s still with the sleepers.”

“They’re more than likely on their way here now. The ink will guide them.”

Tanya nodded. That boy, Haider. He’d been fed instructions for who to find. He was a kid, he couldn’t drive, but the ink had control of others who could. They would likely all be on their way after her now.

“Think of that vial like the mother ship,” Southland said, confirming Tanya’s new thought. “All the ink will follow it and go back into hibernation—if our plan works.”

“That’s a big if.”

"It will work, I know it. But you better hurry."

Tanya's soaked knees were already getting numb from the cold water. "Just so you know, I'm terrified of small spaces."

"That's probably the point. That's why the ink would require this of you," Southland said, his tone thoughtful. "As a tribute. I crawled in there years ago, as a kid. Bumped my head, knocked myself out." He paused, as if remembering. "Probably had a dream about just such a thing. And then the ink found me." Seeing the look on Tanya's face, Southland shrugged. "I'll be right here if there's a problem."

She made a face at him. "But I don't trust you."

"You want to save Niah and the others? Trust is the only choice you've got left."



Tanya pulled herself through the hole. She could feel the damp stone pressing against her back and sides. She had a flashlight in one hand, the vial of ink in the other. She had to snake her way farther. How was she ever going to get back?

More important, why would Southland have ever come down here as a child? Maybe this was just a trick. Maybe he'd found this hole, never gone in and was just letting Tanya go in so he could dash away, and she'd never been seen again. Maybe he saw her as a nemesis, competing for the ink's attention, and he needed to get rid of her.

The thought filled her with panic, and panic made her twitch, and the twitching made her push against the rock, which just made the panic surge even more.

Tanya stalled. She wasn't doing this just for her. The ink had Brad and Niah and others. It wasn't going to let them go without a fight.

But now the panic took hold, scrubbing the bravery out of her. "I want to come out!" she screamed, her ragged breaths fogging up the hole.

"But you're so close," Southland said.

No. Not *Southland*. Because the voice wasn't coming from behind her.

Tanya swallowed.

The voice was coming from in front of her, from the other end of the passageway.

She shone the flashlight ahead, but all she could see was dark.

"Just a few more feet," Southland said again.

Maybe it was him. Maybe her ears were just playing tricks on her.

Tanya closed her eyes, pushed and pulled and squeezed, and then felt herself slide downward as the cavern widened, felt herself slipping, pitching forward, until...

SPLASH!

Tanya bolted up, looking around. She was in another chamber, another well. The water here was even colder, even deeper, going right up to her waist. She shivered and shone the light upward, only to find a cavern wall with no exit except for the way she'd come.

"Tanya," the voice said. It didn't sound like Southland anymore—or the ink.

Still clutching the vial, Tanya cast her flashlight over the rippling water. The sounds of dripping and splashing filled the

chamber, echoing off the walls. Maybe it was just a voice in her head. Maybe it was the fear talking to her. Maybe—

Something began to push itself out of the water. Tanya made a guttural noise deep in her throat as she trained her flashlight on it. The thing coming out of the water was darker than the cavern, darker than anything Tanya had seen other than the ink in the vial.

It was growing. Like the ink, it was some kind of liquid, although now it was thickening into a larger form that stood almost as tall as Tanya. Two appendages pushed out of the wobbling black torso, forming the length and girth of a pair of arms. And atop the form, a neck and head.

It wasn't human, but it was beginning to look like one. Or the shadow of one.

Tanya backed away, not because the thing was approaching her, but because it was beginning to form features that looked more and more like something—no, *someone*—Tanya knew. “No,” Tanya gasped.

“Welcome,” the thing said in a gurgling voice that was shifting and changing as quickly as the syrupy liquid was solidifying into features that Tanya knew too well.

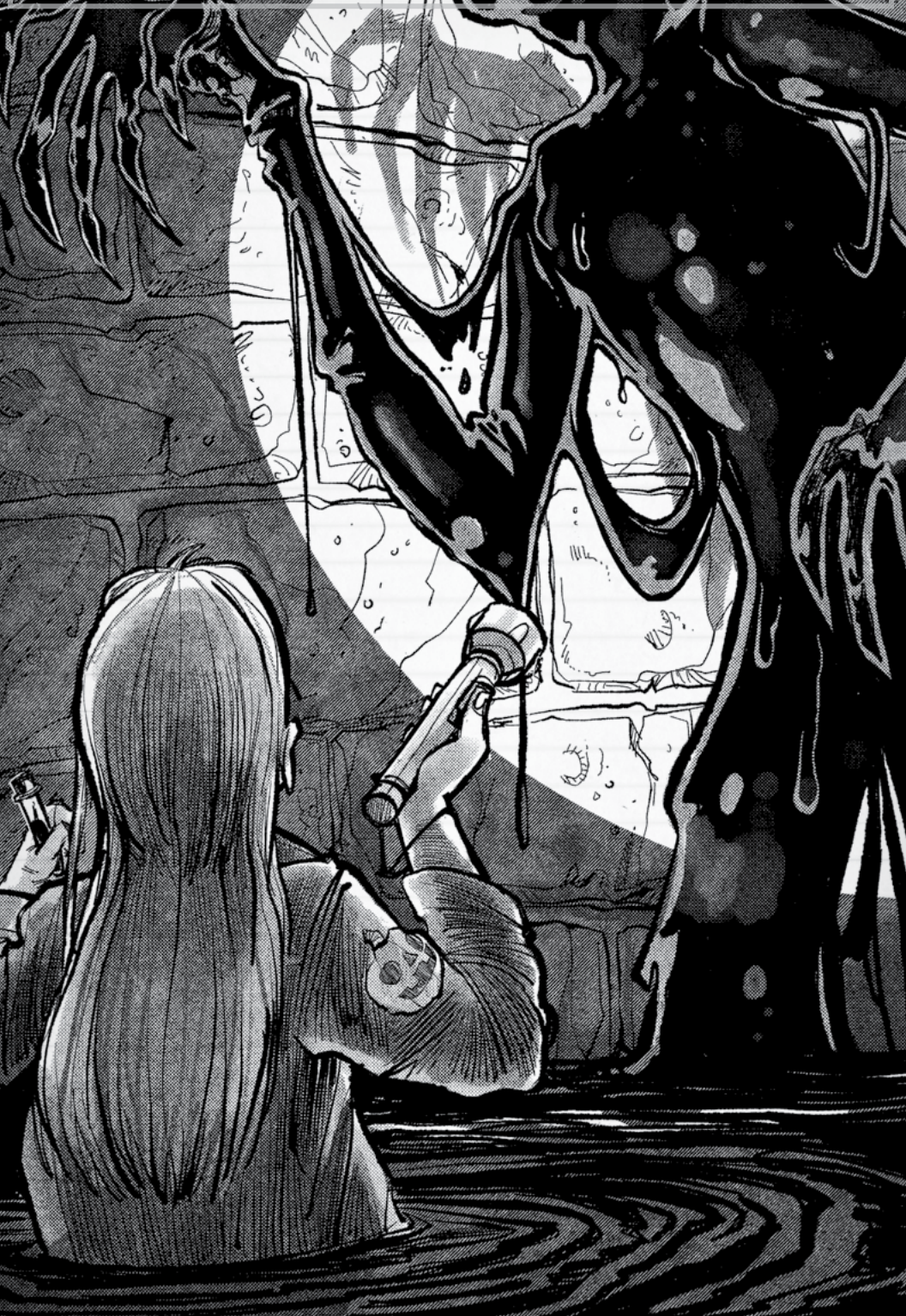
The thing at the bottom of the well was staring right at her, and it looked just like Niah.

“Tanya,” the Niah-Thing said. “You’ve found me.”

Tanya held her ground. “What are you?”

“Don’t play games,” it said. “You know what I am.”

It was the ink, of course. She’d never seen it like this, though. Normally it just flowed in and out of people. It hadn’t taken on a form of this size. Of someone she could recognize. “You’re not Niah,” Tanya said. “Why bother trying to look like her?”



The Niah-Thing cocked its head to one side, as if that was some kind of answer. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me—or for this?” Tanya held up the vial.

The Niah-Thing reached for it, but Tanya pulled the vial away and stuffed it into her pocket. It wasn’t as if that would do much—the ink could trap her here and take it whenever it liked. Still, Tanya was beginning to realize that she was here for a reason, and not just because Southland couldn’t fit through the gap.

She drew herself up to her full height, staring the thing in its pseudo face. “Why me?” Tanya asked.

“We just need another one of your dreams, Tanya,” it murmured. “Nothing more. There is something about them that we find irresistible.”

“Just one dream?” Tanya said. Maybe she could bargain with it.

The Niah-Thing nodded. “Just one. And then I will be complete.”

“And then you’ll leave me alone?” She tried not to let her voice shake. “And let Niah go? And her cousin?”

“For you, we will.”

“And what about the rest of the people?”

“You don’t have very much to bargain with,” the Niah-Thing said. “What other choice do you have?”

Tanya did not have a good answer. *Any* answer.

“Exactly. This is where our story ends, Tanya. This is where we grow strong enough that we don’t need Mr. Southland, or you, anymore.”

“Just one dream,” Tanya said, running this through her head. One dream. And then it would be all over.

“Make it a good one,” the Niah-Thing said, its lips flowing into a smile that was too long, too wide, to ever fit properly on a human.

Tanya took a deep breath. Just one dream. One last dream. She closed her eyes and waited.

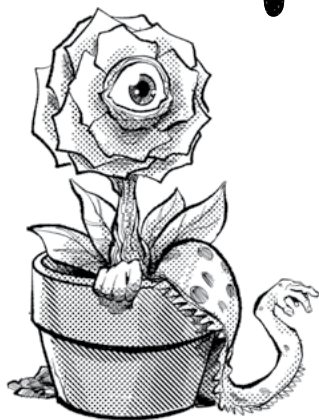
She didn’t need to keep them open to know that the Niah-Thing was dissolving before her, flowing back into a liquid. She could hear the gurgling sound of it, hear it splashing through the well water, and then feel the cold liquid flowing up her legs, torso, neck and into her open mouth.

Tanya gagged, swallowed and let herself dream.

Just one dream, the Niah-Thing had asked for.

But Tanya had given it two.

BRANCHING OUT



“I did it!” Samuel exclaimed, jumping up and down and flapping his arms like he was going to take off. “It works, and I did it all by myself!”

And then, as if to prove it, Samuel held up the test tube and swished the contents around for all to see. He moved away from his desk and strode to the front of the class, closer to Mr. Munsch’s desk. Inside the tube was a green liquid, thick like syrup, and it had a smell.

Eventually the liquid settled, and Mr. Munsch came close enough to inspect it. “Well, you certainly did *something*.”

“Looks like you made some lime Jell-O,” a voice chimed in from behind. Samuel and Mr. Munsch turned to see Liran sitting there, rolling his eyes. “*Badly*.”

Liran sat in the front row of the classroom, not by choice but because Mr. Munsch had put him there to separate him from some of the others. The rest of the students had been working on their own things, but all the jumping and screaming had caught their attention.

“It’s not Jell-O,” Samuel said, not realizing that Liran wasn’t really interested in an explanation.

“Go on,” Liran said with a fake grin.

“Liran, enough,” Mr. Munsch tried, but it was hard to stop Liran when he got started.

Samuel still did not realize what was happening. He explained, “It’s my own distillation of chlorophyll. I took it from some of the plants around my house, but that’s not what’s amazing about it.”

Liran gave a look of mock astonishment. “Samuel, what have you done?! Tell us!”

Already other kids around Liran were beginning to giggle and guffaw. Some of Liran’s closest followers were also piping in. “Tell us, Samuel!” could be heard bubbling around the room like popcorn.

Samuel was often the target of the classroom’s negative attention. He was easy to bait, and he struggled to make friends. This suited Liran’s needs just fine.

“People need to eat,” Samuel said. “All animals do. That’s how they survive. But not most plants. They just use the sun to make their own energy. They use the green pigment. Chlorophyll. They feed directly from the sun.”

Now it was Mr. Munsch’s turn to enter the conversation and steer it somewhere more productive. “But that’s nothing

new, Samuel. You've extracted the chlorophyll from plants. I mean, what's the point of it? What's your hypothesis?"

Samuel held up the test tube and smiled. "Oh, but my chlorophyll is different. I found a way to change it so that animals, maybe even people, could use it to harness energy from the sun."

Now everybody was staring at Mr. Munsch and Samuel.

"And how did you do that?" Mr. Munsch asked.

Samuel looked at the tube, rolling it around and watching the green liquid slosh back and forth. "I'm not ready to reveal my formula just yet," he said.



There was one thing Liran liked to do after lunch, especially on a nice sunny day, and that was play soccer. Sports came easily to him.

The field at the school was large enough to have at least two games going on at once. Liran and his gang always claimed the larger field, while the younger kids were relegated to the muddy pitch.

As far as Liran was concerned, the large field was his. And anybody who came traipsing along in the middle of a game was impinging on his business and his time. Few did, even the teachers on supervision duty in their ridiculous orange vests, so Liran and his handpicked group of up-and-coming athletes were generally in the clear.

That was why it came as a bit of a surprise when Liran, in the midst of making a particularly good breakaway, caught someone meandering onto the field.

“Hey, Liran!”

Liran balked, and in that one moment his friend Noam swept in, took the ball from him and fired it off in the opposite direction. A goal was scored.

Liran fumed. He focused his attention on the kid who had *dared* to mess with his killer play.

“Liran, it’s me! Samuel!”

Samuel stood there in the middle of the field, waving at him like an idiot.

Liran let out a slow breath, trying to figure out what to do with this guy. He turned to the others. Noam, Felix, Matt, Dexter...they were all looking at Liran for some kind of direction.

Liran began to pace toward Samuel, but Samuel was moving even quicker than expected and was almost to him.

“So,” Samuel said almost breathlessly. “How are you?”

Liran blinked. “What?”

“Your lunch was good, right?”

“Samuel, I am trying to *not* kick your butt right now, but you’re making it really, *really* hard.” He held out his hand and made a fist. This usually worked so well that Liran rarely got into fights and mostly got his way.

He looked from his fist to Samuel to ensure that Samuel understood.

Samuel was looking at the fist. He reached out and took hold of it, staring at it intently.

Instantly Liran pulled his hand back. “What are you doing?”

“Fascinating,” Samuel said, eyeing Liran in a way that made him uncomfortable. “You don’t see it, do you?”

By now Liran's fellow soccer players had moved in, circling Samuel like sharks. "We're trying to play soccer," Noam said.

Samuel looked up from Liran's arm to stare at the boys. He took a minute to survey where he was and then saw Mr. Munsch standing at the edge of the field, wearing his bright-orange vest and shaking his head.

"Oh, right," Samuel said. "You are playing soccer."

"And you are one weird dude," Noam said.



Later, during social studies in the final block of the day, Liran and Dexter were busy trying to fill out a worksheet that had them labeling a map from some random corner of the world they'd never heard of.

Samuel, of course, was working on his own. Normally he would have had his head in a book of some kind, usually about nature or animals or plants. Instead he was staring at Liran and jotting down notes in his workbook.

Liran was about to say something rude to Samuel when he felt himself getting lightheaded. It was almost as if his blood sugar was going down. This happened often, and it meant he needed a quick snack. But he'd just had afternoon recess, and he'd eaten two granola bars.

Still, the wooziness was there and not going away.

"Gimme a sec," Liran told Dexter, and started to get up from his seat. He found that his legs were feeling wobbly. He managed to make it over to the window that looked out to the

parking lot. He planted his hands on the ledge and breathed. Hard.

Maybe it was more than needing a snack.

But standing in the light made him feel a little better. Made him feel—

He stopped and turned.

Samuel was also by the window now, staring at him and making notes in his workbook.

“What are you up to?” Liran asked.

“Just seeing how you’re doing,” Samuel said.

Liran tried to read Samuel’s notes, but the printing left much to be desired, and it was upside down. “You’ve been acting weirder than usual,” Liran managed, feeling faint. “What are you writing in there?”

“Oh, just observations,” Samuel said. With his free hand, he pointed to the window. “It’s sunny out there. Lots of light, right?”

It was true. The sunlight did make Liran feel better. Or at least less woozy.

“Liran, are you all right?” came Mr. Munsch’s voice.

The boys turned to see their teacher wandering over. Joining them by the window, he spotted Samuel’s notes, and then he eyed Liran carefully. “You don’t look good,” he said. “In fact, you look a bit green around the gills.”

Liran’s heart skipped a beat. He turned to Samuel, who’d gone back to scribbling.

Mr. Munsch stepped away, not wanting to catch whatever Liran might have come down with. “You let me know if you need to go to the office to call home, okay?”

“Okay,” Liran breathed, not looking at Mr. Munsch but staring intensely at Samuel.

Only when the teacher had walked away did Liran step closer to Samuel.

It was something Mr. Munsch had said. *You look a bit green.*

“What did you do?” Liran whispered. “Where is it?”

Samuel looked up from his notes. “What’s that?”

“That green guck you made. Where is it?”

First Samuel just smiled. Then he spoke, his voice hushed. “It was easy,” he said. “You always get up at lunch break, walk around to other people’s desks and never pay close attention to what you’re eating and drinking.”

Oh no, Liran thought. “You put it in my lunch?!”

The last part came out loudly, and Samuel put a finger to his lips.

“You’re not going to want to tell Mr. Munsch,” Samuel said. “Because if you get me in trouble, you won’t know what to do.”

Liran felt a rush of fear. “What. Have. You. Done.”

Samuel leaned in close, picking up his notebook and pointing to the scrawl. “Science experiment, duh?”

It felt to Liran like the world around him was spinning. He wasn’t sure if it was on account of what Samuel was telling him or what Samuel had given him.

He clutched his stomach. His head felt funny too. He tilted his head back and sneezed.

“Gross!” came a voice from the classroom.

Liran opened his eyes and saw it. Green flecks of liquid on the window. They were thick and syrupy, and already gravity was pulling the beads of liquid down. Slowly, like molasses.

“Liran, nice one!” came another voice.

Mr. Munsch came by, saw the window and winced. “Liran, you’ve got to sneeze into the crook of your elbow. That’s, like, a lesson from first grade.”

Liran moved back. “I need to use the bathroom,” he said.

“Yes!” Mr. Munsch nodded emphatically. “I believe you do!”

Liran hobbled out of the classroom, the world tilting and pitching around him.

“I’ll go and help,” Samuel said.

Mr. Munsch nodded, staring at the mess on the glass.



Liran wasn’t aware of moving down the hallway. He recalled leaving the classroom and then suddenly he was standing in front of the mirror in the boys’ washroom. He looked horrible. He was green—and not just from the thick liquid oozing out of his nose.

His skin had a sickly pallor. His face and neck were puffy and green, and when he reached up a hand to touch his face—

“Of course, it’s just an experiment. I’m not entirely sure what the results will be.”

In the reflection Liran saw Samuel standing a few paces back. He had the notebook in his hands.

Liran did not turn around. He was too consumed with his mottled appearance. He winced. His features were shifting. The veins in his face, once hidden by fleshy cheeks, were pushing themselves outward and pulsating. And they were *green*.

He leaned closer to the mirror and sighed heavily. The glass fogged up, and Samuel stepped in and wiped away the condensation. He looked at the residue on his hand. "It's probably oxygen," he stated with clinical detachment. "I can test that later. You need carbon dioxide, sunshine...and water," he said, pointing at the sink. Samuel turned on one of the faucets, and a stream of water hit the white tub of the sink.

Liran looked at it. He swallowed. His mouth felt dry.

"Go on," Samuel urged him.

But instead of lowering his head to suck the water back, Samuel just put his hands into the sink. He hadn't realized how green they'd become. How there were little threadlike hairs—no, roots!—protruding from under his fingernails.

He stood there, letting the water run over his hands, breathing in and out, in and out, like a pulse.

"Yes," Samuel hissed. "It works! Just like I planned!"

Liran felt stronger with the water in him. "You have to turn me back," he said eventually.

"Why?"

"Because this isn't right."

Samuel moved away. "But you are going to be part of something new and wonderful," he said. He sounded almost envious. "You understand what is happening, don't you?"

Liran did. His thoughts had always been animal thoughts, stirred up in an animal brain. But that was changing. He still longed to move, to speak, to think, but deep inside his skull things were changing. Cells were growing walls, chloroplasts were forming, and he began to sense things, movements, in the air around him—even Samuel's heartbeat thumping

through his chest. Liran could feel it, and he could also sense something Samuel hadn't said.

That Samuel was scared.

"Go back and tell Mr. Munsch that I'm still here. I'll be a little bit longer," Liran said.

Samuel thought about this. "Right," he said, nodding. "That gets us to the end of the day. The bell will ring." He pointed to one of the washroom stalls. "Go wait there. Nobody will bother you. We will continue the experiment after school."



But Liran did not stay in the washroom. He slipped out the back door and crossed the schoolyard, keeping to the edges until he got to the forested area adjacent to the main road. There, among the branches and the foliage, he waited.

It was shaded and cool, and when he placed his hands on the trunks of the trees, he could feel the sap pulsing deep inside them. He reached down and tried to pull his shoes off, but his hands were becoming less useful. The muscle cells were already beginning to fuse with plant cells, and it was hard to bend his fingers. He found that if he flexed, he could unfurl vine-like tendrils that curled and pulled, and he tore the shoes off his feet.

His feet were dark and thick, and when he dragged them through the earth, they made contact with the roots of the trees, and he could feel their ever-stretching matrix of roots buzz with his own thoughts.

He stood still, breathing in and out and letting the sunlight filter through the branches and over him.

But it was not enough.

And so he waited.

Liran could still hear, or at least sense, the vibrations in the air. He used to interpret them as sounds. Now they were just frequencies that made his skin vibrate and the leaves peeling off his body tremble.

But he knew the wavelength that signaled the school bell at the end of the day.

He felt the thuds of hundreds of footsteps making their way down the path out of the schoolyard.

He even felt the footfalls of one last straggler, moving uncertainly from the edge of the schoolyard onto the path. Liran recognized the gait and step. And he opened his mouth to breathe out a word: “Samuel...”

Through the foliage he could see a shape. His eyes were still working, but for how much longer? He lurched forward, breaking connection with the roots. Several paces ahead of him was Samuel, who was carrying both his and Liran’s backpacks.

Samuel stopped. His eyes went wide. He staggered back, holding his hands up. “Wait!” he exclaimed. “Don’t come too close. You’ll be seen. And you can’t be seen, not like *that*, not yet.”

“Come closer,” Liran said, waving him off the path.

Samuel bit his lip and nodded. He took off his backpack and pulled out his workbook. He scrawled more notes. Then he fished out his cell phone and aimed it at Liran to snap a photo. “Astounding,” he said. “I didn’t think it would work so quickly.”

Liran nodded. “I need to show you something.”

“I can see from here,” Samuel said.

“You don’t understand,” Liran returned. “I can feel the trees. Feel the plants. I can hear them. They can speak!”

“I thought so.” Samuel nodded. “What do they say?”

Liran beckoned again. “Come close, and I’ll show you.”

Carefully Samuel edged farther into the forest.

“Here,” Liran said. He held out his hand, a changing appendage of bark and leaf, and pressed it against the flesh of Samuel’s arm.

“What are you doing?” Samuel shivered.

“Just a bit closer,” Liran hissed. He wrapped his tendrils around Samuel’s arms. The vines pulsed out of Liran, tightening around Samuel’s wrists. “You’ve got to stay close if you want me to tell you what the plants can say.”

“Not so tight,” Samuel said. He dropped his notebook and pencil.

But Liran was insistent. “You didn’t really check all of the plant DNA, did you?”

Samuel gasped. “I extracted the chloroplasts,” he said. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing’s *wrong*,” Liran said. “Only I think you weren’t clear on all the plants you pulled up out of the soil. Most of them get their nutrients from the sunlight...”

“That’s right,” Samuel said. “They do.”

“But not *all* of them,” Liran said. “Some of them feed on insects.”

Samuel nodded nervously. “The flytraps. The pitcher plants. The sundews.”



“Exactly.” Liran reeled Samuel in even closer. He could feel Samuel’s breath, and the carbon dioxide felt good as he drew it into what had once been his lungs.

“Liran, you’re *hurting* me—”

“But insects wouldn’t be the right size for a much larger plant. Would they?”

Samuel struggled, but Liran held him.

“I can’t use the sun. Not yet. Still part animal. Still need to feed to grow—”



Nobody heard the scream. The kids had left school for the day. The teachers had all gone in the opposite direction, to the parking lot, and driven off.

A breeze blew across the schoolyard, rustling the leaves and turning the pages of a fallen notebook.

And in the forest the plants lay still.

And fed.

YOUR CALL CANNOT BE COMPLETED



The phone was lying at the edge of the park, where the mowed grass of the sports field ended and the woods began. The forest beyond was part of a conservation area, and you could access it from other points with various walking trails. My dad took me there all the time for some exercise and fresh air, but he always cautioned me to stay on the trail because there was poison ivy and other plants lurking in the woods that you didn't want to touch. Today, though, it was just me. I'd biked over to have some time to myself.

And I wasn't heading to the woods anyway—I was more focused on the phone. Someone had clearly dropped it there, and it couldn't have been on purpose.

I looked around, scanning for a sign of someone else nearby. But there was nobody in the park but me.

I looked down at the phone and hesitated. Should I pick it up? It wasn't mine, but I knew somebody would be missing it.

As I stopped, I was pretty sure I could hear something in the woods. Maybe just the squirrels racing through twigs and fallen leaves. Maybe not.

I scanned the dense underbrush. "Hello?" I called out. "Anyone there?"

The woods did not respond, save for the sound of chirping birds—which usually just faded into the background. But the noise was suddenly flooding my ears and mind with a new intensity, like the birds were screaming at me. A warning, maybe?

I took a tentative step beyond the grass and into the forest. Almost immediately the sharp needles of the closest pines pushed against me, pricking my hands. The trees were so densely packed. Who would go into the forest from this end, and not take the trail?

I stepped back and looked down at the phone.

I didn't have a phone of my own. Mom said I wasn't old enough or responsible enough yet, but that I'd get one next year, when I was ready.

I *was* ready. I was responsible. Because I knew the responsible thing to do was to pick this thing up and see who it belonged to so I could give it back.

The phone was in a black case and had a screen protector on it, though there were a few hairline fractures running through the glass. Somebody had dropped the phone at some point, although the damage wasn't from here, because it had landed in soft grass.

I clicked the button on the side, and the screen lit up. It couldn't have been here for too long, because wouldn't the battery have run out?

Along the bottom of the screen were several icons. One of them I recognized as the word-bubble symbol for text messages. It had a little red number one beside it. I clicked on it.

Is it you?

My breath caught in my throat.

Those three words—*Is it you?*—etched in my brain. Had the phone been dropped suddenly because of some kind of foul play? Had whoever had been holding this phone been discovered? By somebody they weren't expecting? Somebody dangerous?

And why would they drop their phone?

There was no point responding to the message. What I needed to do was take it to the police. Better still, maybe just leave the phone here in case this was some kind of crime scene. I should go home and tell my parents. They'd call the police for me. I was just about to put the phone back when—

...

Three dots appeared under the text message. Somebody was typing.

Of course it's you. How could it be anybody else?

I looked up from the phone.

Nobody was around. The park was empty because it was early, because nobody came this far out to the edge, because I was one of those loner kids who liked the time to myself.

I thought about all of these things, about the message and who it was directed to.

And then I typed,

Who are you?

Typed and waited.

...

You wouldn't believe me , came the response.

Do you know who I am?

Yes.

Do I know you?

...

Yes.

A shiver ran down my spine.

Then who

I started to type but saw the three dots, and the words appeared:

Are you the first?

The first? What do you mean?

Somebody had to have found the phone first. Maybe it's you. I don't know.

It was lying there by itself, I typed.

It's always lying there by itself.

What do you mean always? It has to belong to somebody.

JEFF SZPIRGLAS

It doesn't matter. Every time we try to break the pattern, it ends up the same way. I could explain it all, but I'm using up our time.

Our time?

This was freaking me out, but I couldn't stop. I needed to know what was going on.

Yours and mine, yes. There's a window for this thing, you see. It was inevitable that you were going to find the phone on the ground.

Your phone?

Not mine, not yours. But we both have it.

No, I have the phone. You have a different one.

It's the same phone. Doesn't matter. You'll find out soon.

A jolt of fear went through me.

What do you mean soon?

Every time it happens, we make notes. Running away didn't stop it. Calling for help didn't stop it. Breaking the routine was pointless. Whatever has been happening to us is GOING to happen. I just don't know when it all started. The first one to pick up the phone might come later.

What are you talking about? Who else has picked up this phone?

I did.

But you've got a different phone.

Same phone. I keep trying to tell you. Same phone, different time.

I stopped. I gripped the phone in my hand, staring at its lit screen, and held it up in front of me, as if to prove it was really there. I knew I needed to ask more questions.

What's going to happen?
And where are you?

I'm right here.

I lowered the phone and did a 360 turn, stopping when I was looking at the forest. I stared through the branches, searching for any sign of movement.

Then I looked down at the phone again. New message.

I'll be honest. I could have said more. Could have tried to warn you. We've used that strategy before.

We? I thought. The message kept coming.

But I'm using a different strategy. You'll see in a minute or so. We keep a log of everything we've tried. There's a list. I don't think it's complete. None of us knows who's the first in the cycle. Maybe it's whoever brought the phone. Maybe we did bring the phone here in the first place. Maybe the phone is the cause of it all. Something in it? Or is it this place? Who knows.

I wasn't even going to try to understand anymore. But clearly something bad was about to happen.

I knew I should drop the phone, but curiosity outweighed the vague threat from the messages. My bike was close by. I could turn and run at any moment I wanted to.

And then it happened.

I could feel it in my body. Not pain, not discomfort, but a shift. It was like dizziness, but not just in my head. I felt it happening slowly and simultaneously in every part of my body—hands, feet, stomach, lungs, even my hair. And the blink of my eyes.

I blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Something had happened. I wasn't sure what. I wasn't anywhere new. I was still standing here, at the edge of the park, where the mowed grass met the woods.

The phone was on the ground.

And in my hand.

I gasped.

How could it be? A different phone?

I reached down to try to pick it up and found that I could not.

My hand passed right through it.

The one I was holding, however, was still solid.

Again I tried to scoop up the phone on the ground.

Like a ghost's, my hand went right through it. Like either it or I wasn't there.

I began to breathe quickly, in little scared spurts.

Then I felt the phone in my hand and turned it back on.



The texts I'd just had were gone. But there was another icon on the phone. It was a little notepad-like app, and it was open.

On the notepad, I saw. I read:

- call for help
- run away
- do nothing
- don't interact with the new one

And then the last point.

- find the first. And stall.

There was a log of when each message had been texted. After each note was the time it had been added. They were all just minutes apart. Seven minutes.

I clicked the phone off.

Why seven minutes apart?

Now was not the time to deal with those notes. I backed away from where I'd been standing and stared into the woods. "Hello? Are you there now?" I asked, hoping for a response, but all I got was the breeze moving through the branches, moaning at me.

I turned around, and then I saw.

A figure coming through the park, off in the distance. Moving past the rusty old swing set with no one swinging on it. There was just this one new person in the park, and me.

The person was coming closer, though.

Coming right toward me.

A figure whose features kept coming more and more into focus.

“No!” I screamed.

The figure didn’t respond. *Couldn’t*, I realized. Not yet. Not for seven minutes at least. Maybe six, at this point.

The figure didn’t even see me, now just a few paces away, as it scooped up the phone and scanned the area, looking for its owner.

I looked back at the list of notes. I thought about them. We’d tried so many strategies already, but they weren’t working.

Why weren’t they working?

It was time. We were trapped, each one of us. The loop would keep recurring. We’d all tried something different before, and then it hit me.

Try something the same.

I looked down at the phone in my hand, opened up the notepad app and typed in the same instruction:

Find the first. And stall.

I’d had déjà vu before, but not like this. Would it work? Would I remember everything I’d typed? And would I type it back?

Staring at the other me, the one standing there looking perplexed, knowing that I was about to continue looping, and knowing that the clock was running, I typed it in.

Is it you?

I watched and waited for the reaction. My reaction. Of course, the other me couldn't see where I was standing. Not yet, at any rate. I wondered where all the others had gone. Someplace else in the loop, perhaps? Or disappeared? Erased from time itself?

If that was the case, was this all the time I had remaining? Five minutes? Four minutes?

I stared at my other self, who was busy scanning the woods and then looking down at the phone. Why wasn't I responding?

Of course! I had to keep typing!

Of course it's you. How could it be anybody else?

And then I waited for the response.



part five

The second dream is the best dream.

In the second dream, the world is full of people and their dreams.

In the second dream, all of the people are dreaming.

They are dreaming, and they do not stop.

They are dreaming forever.



Tanya opened her eyes. Where was she? She tried to recall what had happened to her, where she'd been, but there were only half-remembered bits and pieces, sometimes images, sometimes sensations. There was darkness and cold, liquid water, thick ink...

And now faces. Two of them.

Niah and Joel Southland stood over her. She felt cold, smooth floor pressing against her back. She was lying on it—not the murky bottom of a well, but the dirty tiles of the coffee shop. How had she gotten here?

“What...?”

“Easy, Tanya,” Southland said, but Tanya pushed herself away from him. Her gaze flitted from Southland to Niah. She didn’t understand.

“It’s okay,” Niah said. “You’ve been dreaming.”

Tanya blinked the world back into focus. She pulled herself off the floor and stood up slowly. Niah was there—her eyes were real eyes, her skin was real skin. There was no ink around her, or anywhere else Tanya could see, for that matter. She wondered if this had all been a dream, but the overturned tables and the police wandering about, as dazed as the rest of the people, told her it was not.

She moved over to Niah and gave her a big hug. “I thought I’d lost you,” she said, her voice breaking. She held her so tightly that Southland had to pull her away.

“What did you do?” Southland asked. “You were here, you ran out, you fell down...” He watched her. “I brought you back to the coffee shop.”

“A dream,” Tanya said. “That was the only way to stop the ink. I had to dream that I was awake and lead it to a place where it would never escape.”

“Like where?” Niah asked.

Southland’s eyes went wide. “My old house?”

Tanya nodded.

“The well?”

“The well,” she said firmly.

“But it can get out of there,” Southland said.

“That’s not the point. I dreamed a second dream, inside the one I was having. That’s where the ink is now.” Tanya dug into her pocket and pulled out the vial. There was a dark liquid still inside of it. “It’s sleeping,” Tanya said. “It’s in a dream inside of a dream.”

Niah looked confused. “But *what* did you dream?”

“I told myself, *Dream the same dream*,” Tanya said. “It’s the best dream. The second dream has another dream inside of it. That dream is the same as the first dream. And inside of that, another dream.”

“Huh,” Southland said, regarding Tanya with some degree of admiration. “That was clever.”

“You’re in a lot of trouble, Joel Southland.”

He nodded sheepishly. There was something different about him. There were wrinkles around his eyes that hadn’t been there before. His movements were more erratic, nervy. He didn’t hold himself with the same air of authority as had the famous Joel Southland, author extraordinaire. “I know,” he said, biting his lip and exhaling loudly. “Still,” he continued, “I don’t know how you did it. Everyone woke up, and I watched the ink roll off their bodies, back to you.” He pointed. “Back to that vial.”

“Back to the dream,” Tanya said. “That was really the only way to stop it. It just wanted to grow stronger. And now it can. *Forever*.”

Niah swallowed. “But isn’t that bad? Like, what if the ink gets out of there?”

“It won’t,” Tanya said. “Because we’re going to take it someplace safe.”

Niah looked doubtful but linked her arm with Tanya's. "Someplace safe, huh?" she said.

"This sounds like a job for Brad," came a voice from behind them. Tanya turned. Brad stood there, as if nothing had happened, brandishing his car keys like he'd managed to put Excalibur itself on a key fob.



Tanya and Niah sat in the back seat, Brad up front, driving and listening to hip-hop music waaaaay too loud. "So where are we going again?" he asked.

"Southland's old house," Niah said. "We're going to put this ink back where it belongs."

"That creepy well?"

Tanya nodded.

"There's just this one thing," Niah said. "How did you know to have a dream within a dream within a dream within a...you know?"

Tanya shrugged. "I just knew."

Niah looked out the window, watching the lights from the city recede into darkness as they roared through the countryside. She shook her head. "I still don't understand. How would you even know how, or when, to end your dream?"

"I just did," Tanya said. "And a good thing too." She smiled to herself.

"Yeah," Niah whispered, staring at the night around them. It was much darker outside than usual. "Good thing."

Tanya looked down at the vial of ink in her hand. She couldn't be sure, really, but it seemed to have grown even darker.



It was a good thing she wasn't dreaming.
A good thing she was awake for what felt like the first time
in ages.
Wasn't she?

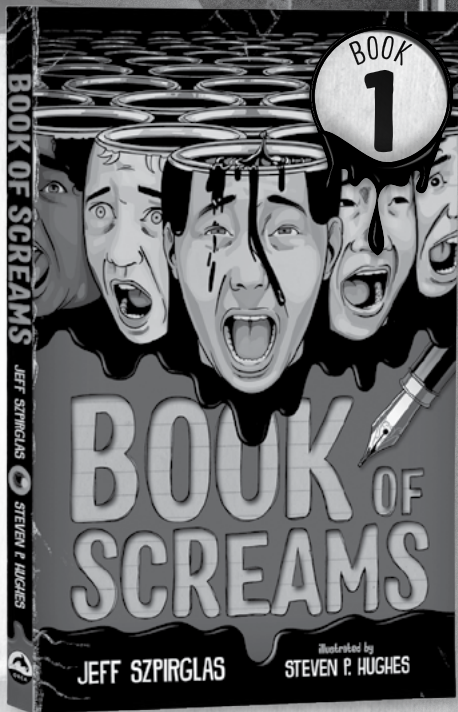


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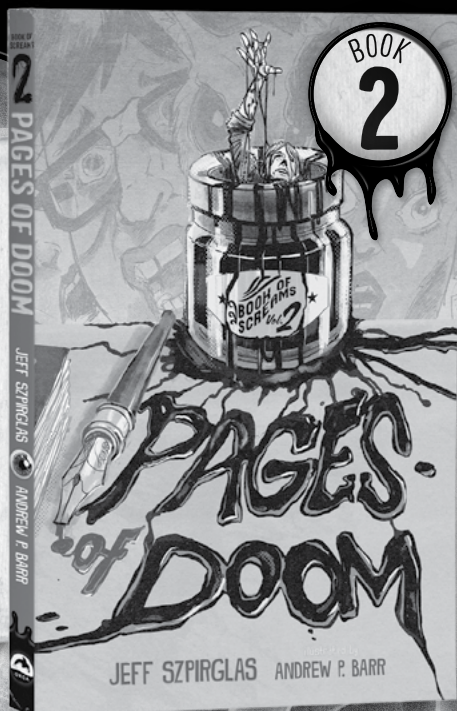
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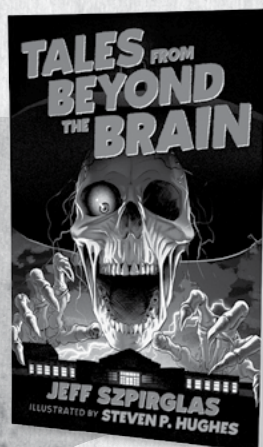


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DANIELLE SAINT-ONGE



JEFF SZPIRGLAS is the author of several works for young people, including the horror collections *Tales from Beyond the Brain* and *Tales from the Fringes of Fear*. He is also the coauthor, with Danielle Saint-Onge, of a number of Orca Echoes titles, including *Shark Bait!*, *X Marks the Spot* and *Messy Miranda*. Jeff has worked at CTV and was an editor at *Chirp*, *Chickadee* and *Owl* magazines. In his spare time, he teaches grade school. Jeff lives with his family in Kitchener, Ontario.



ANDREW P. BARR is an illustrator whose work has appeared in magazines, newspapers and movies, as well as on movie posters and T-shirts. In 2022 the book *Wild Outside*, which he illustrated, won the Yellow Cedar Award and the Children's Literature Roundtables of Canada's Information Book Award. Andrew lives in Oakville, Ontario.