



WAKING
NIGHTMARE

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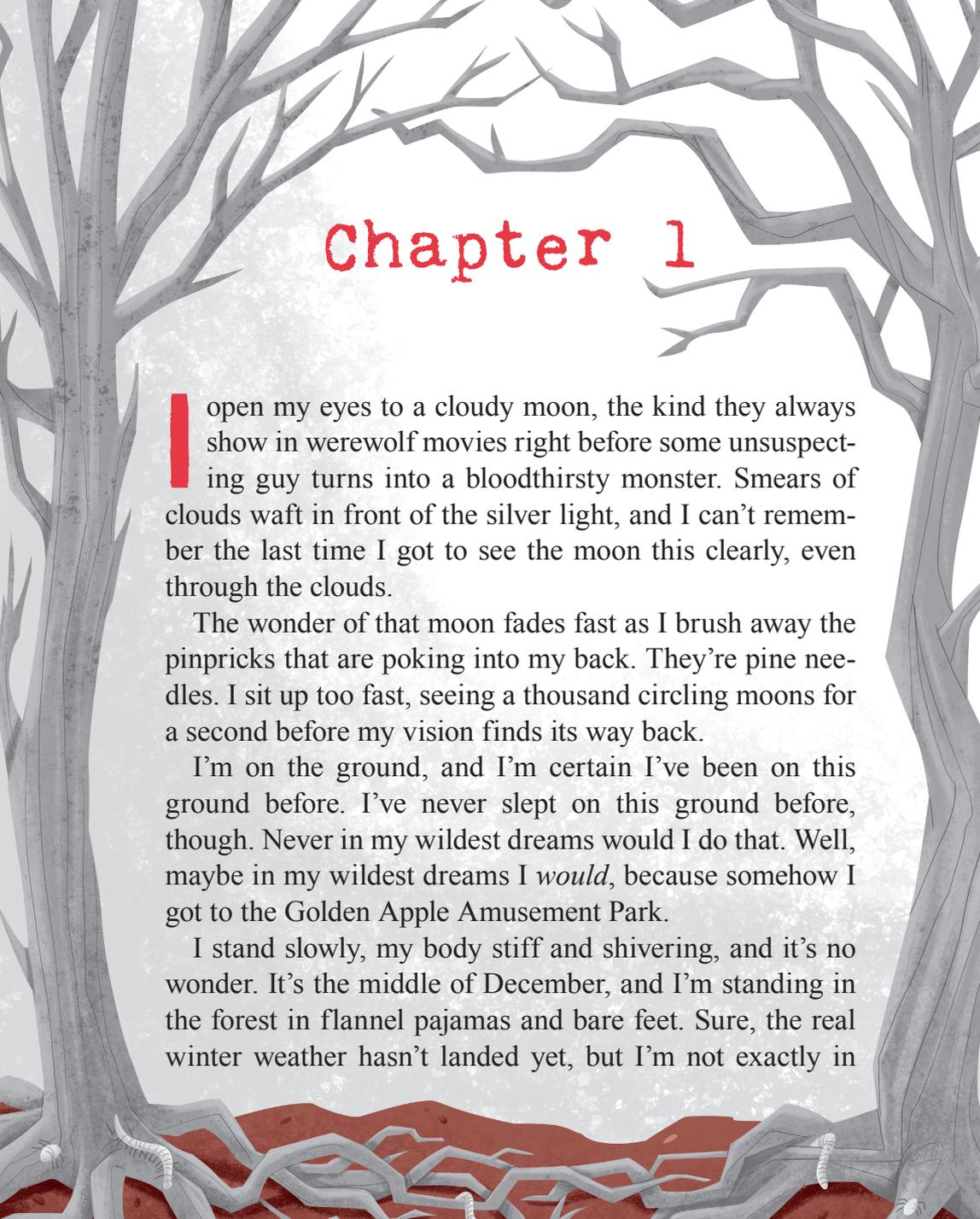
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Chapter 1

I open my eyes to a cloudy moon, the kind they always show in werewolf movies right before some unsuspecting guy turns into a bloodthirsty monster. Smears of clouds waft in front of the silver light, and I can't remember the last time I got to see the moon this clearly, even through the clouds.

The wonder of that moon fades fast as I brush away the pinpricks that are poking into my back. They're pine needles. I sit up too fast, seeing a thousand circling moons for a second before my vision finds its way back.

I'm on the ground, and I'm certain I've been on this ground before. I've never slept on this ground before, though. Never in my wildest dreams would I do that. Well, maybe in my wildest dreams I *would*, because somehow I got to the Golden Apple Amusement Park.

I stand slowly, my body stiff and shivering, and it's no wonder. It's the middle of December, and I'm standing in the forest in flannel pajamas and bare feet. Sure, the real winter weather hasn't landed yet, but I'm not exactly in

outdoor gear. The wind swirls in tight circles around me, and I throw my arms around myself, but not before I notice the clumps of dirt crusted to my hands and buried under my fingernails. A violent shiver works its way down my spine as I remember those hands from my nightmare—the dirt I unburied them from.

I look at my own hands again, then search the ground beside me. There, in a pile maybe three feet from where I inexplicably made my bed last night, is a mound of soil beside a small hole. I edge toward the hole, bracing myself to fight off whatever lies in wait for me, but as I stand over the pile, I see the hole is empty. I search my hands one more time for a clue as to how I got here and what I was apparently doing in my sleep.

My hands tell me nothing except that I'm freezing.

I turn toward the only path I know for getting home: the path I used to walk with Aaron when we would come back from the Golden Apple factory.

Before Aaron disappeared.

Aaron Peterson was the first friend I made when we moved to Raven Brooks last summer. He liked picking locks and I liked building gadgets and together we served up justice to hoity-toity grocery store owners and inconsiderate dog owners alike. My family has never stayed in one town for long; it's been hard for my dad to hold down a job. Aaron made me hope we would stay put for a while.

He was the first person I met who was as weird as I am. But where my family is quirky at best, Aaron's family was . . . strange.

His dad, Theodore Masters Peterson, was the famed—and troubled—inventor who engineered the Golden Apple Amusement Park, the last in a line of theme parks that had seen their share of disaster. Aaron's mom, Diane, died in a car accident at the end of the summer . . . something that tore their family apart. And Aaron's little sister, Mya, had stood with me in this very park four months ago, begging me for help.

I half run, half walk home, the cold and my raw feet keeping me from moving as fast as I want to. I feel a vague stinging along my ankles, and when I lift my pant legs, I find a series of fresh scrapes etched across my skin, the telltale wounds of blackberry thorns.

By the time I get home, the moon has mostly disappeared behind its protective clouds, and though the streetlights are still on, I know they won't be for long. I'm shivering so hard, I can hardly make it up the trellis and through the window to my room.

“So that's how I got out,” I mutter once I'm safely inside. And that would make sense. Of course I would sneak out the window. It's not like I'm going to chance waking my parents by sauntering out the front door in the middle of the night. Even in my sleep, I must have known better.

But why would I sneak out? Why would I leave in my pajamas? What could I possibly have been looking for?

“And why can’t I remember any of it?”

I stand where I am by my window and search for clues, for any sign at all that I was sleepwalking for a reason, that I’m not completely out of my mind. I see nothing to comfort me, though. The bedsheets are thrown back like I had been sleeping at some point. My desk lamp is on, and while my desk is clear, I know that it wasn’t earlier that night. It never is.

I walk slowly to the desk and pull out the middle drawer, the deepest one. I slide the pencil tray out of the way and lift the tiny tab fastened to the back of the drawer, revealing its false bottom. Setting the pencil tray and plywood aside, I remove the face of the bottom drawer—the decoy drawer—and lift from it the heavy gray binder, its contents spilling out the sides and torn at the edges.

Then I turn to the last page I remember studying before I went to sleep last night. It was a newer article, the latest in the saga of what will happen to the property on which the Golden Apple Amusement Park still sits.

There’s a picture of the old WELCOME sign at the Golden Apple Amusement Park, the black-and-blue graffiti looking like a bruise across its face. The right half of the sign has been burned away, leaving only the WELC, and the face

of the dancing golden apple has been so disfigured, I find myself wishing it had been burned away, too.

Below that picture are two I've already seen—the school picture of Lucy Yi, her head tilted as she smiles, her wrist decorated with the Golden Apple Young Inventors Club bracelet, and the camera-wary Mr. Peterson, his palm blocking the flash.



A date has been set for the long-anticipated hearing over what to do with the land that once housed Raven Brooks's famed amusement park. On December 28, a judge will hear arguments from lawyers representing the landowner, Raven Brooks Municipal Bank and Trust, which took ownership after the Golden Apple Corporation went bankrupt, and lawyers representing EarthPro, a land and business development firm interested in purchasing the land that has stood for years as a reminder of the tragedy that befell a family and a former hometown business.

In a case that has pitted neighbor against neighbor, argument over the land involves the question of what will be done with the ruins of the amusement park and the abandoned factory that resides nearby. Yet as the people of Raven Brooks know, feelings run deeper than a feud over land.

"If I were Brenda Yi, I'd be rooting for EarthPro all the way. After what happened to her daughter, I don't know how she's lived with those ruins as a constant reminder," says Eddie Reisman, a physical therapist at Raven Brooks Bones and Joints.

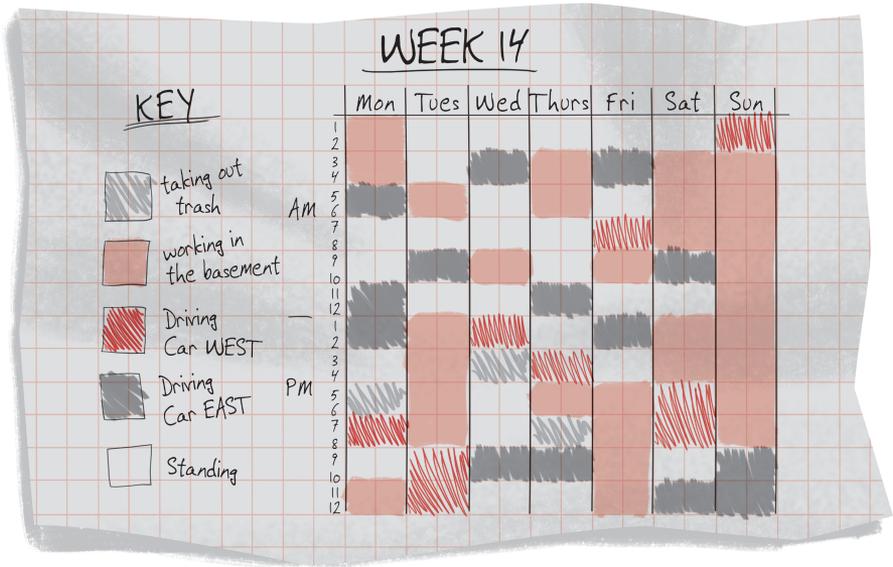
Sally Unger, a cosmetology student, disagrees. "Look, what happened to that poor girl was a tragedy, but selling the land to another faceless corporation? What's that going to solve? It's just going to push all the local businesses out of town!"

Still, others struggle with the question of culpability. Says Herb Villanueva, owner of Buzzy's Coffee Stand in the Square, "I still don't like how nobody was ever really to blame, you know? I mean, yeah, the Golden Apple people paid out the nose, and I guess that's something, but c'mon. We all know who built those rides. No one wants to be the one to say it, but let's just say there's someone still walking free who hasn't had to answer for his part in the whole mess."

I stop reading because I've read it all a million times. I know the story before it hits the papers, before the people at Tillman's natural grocer or the Square or the university are talking about it. Dad talks about it at home to Mom. Maritza talks about it to Enzo. Strangers talk to strangers about it. It's all anyone talks about anymore in Raven Brooks.

I flip past the pages and pages of articles I've kept, eyeing the places I've highlighted, any mention of Mr. Peterson's career. I skip past all the clippings and move on to the graph paper where I've broken the page into careful columns, dates separated by hourly blocks, color-coded with different highlighters so I can easily distinguish actions.

There's no other way to put it, the standing. It's the wandering from his house, the lingering in his front yard. It's him crossing the street to stare up at my window. He does it enough to warrant a highlighter assignment.



I flip to the back of the binder, the back flap bulging under its contents. I slide my index finger and thumb inside and pull out the gold chain with its apple charm. I turn it over and over in my hand, tarnish greening it slowly, but I don't need to be able to read the inscription any more than I need to read all the newspaper articles about the land and the lawsuit.

I still read them, though. I read them looking for any mention at all of Aaron or Mya, of where they've gone and why nobody cares.

Because that's the truth: Nobody cares. I've been watching the Peterson house for 107 days, and I've seen no trace

of Aaron or Mya. It was easy enough to distract myself at first—Enzo’s video game collection and Trinity’s encyclopedic knowledge of Raven Brooks ensured we became fast friends, and Enzo’s younger sister, Maritza, has been nice to me . . . if not exactly forthcoming about her own friendship with Mya.

During the first month of school, people told me to leave it alone, but no matter how much I tried not to worry, with every day that passed my skin felt a little tighter. Until the news finally came in November: Aaron and Mya were shipped off to live with a relative hundreds of miles away.

The strain of the loss must have been too much, Dad told me. It’s probably for the best.

But every night in my dreams, my mind takes me back to the Golden Apple Amusement Park.

To the bracelet I found at the bottom of my trellis.

To the note with the smear of blood.

To the fear in Mya’s voice in that home movie I found in the factory.

Because, if Aaron and Mya are safe somewhere, why can’t I shake the feeling that I failed them?