



**'A dangerously good time'**  
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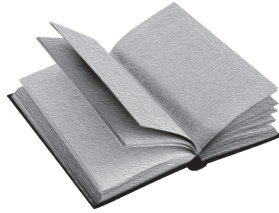
# RAYLEIGH MANN IN THE COMPANY of MONSTERS

**CIANNON SMART**

# ONE

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## ALL TRICKS, NO TREATS



It wasn't yet five o'clock when the city began turning blue.

The bell on his bike's handlebar was a trigger beneath Rayleigh Mann's thumb, one he flicked in warning as he skidded around blind corners; he weaved between puddles from an earlier rainfall, dodging clusters of London's harried commuters. Beneath the indigo glow from streetlamps, their pinched brows were illuminated. People were concerned, no doubt, by nightfall's stealthy arrival. With autumn's early sunsets came the increased risk of missing curfew. It only took one delayed train. A missed bus. That friend or colleague who rambled a little too long. For everyone else, at least.

Rayleigh gritted his teeth, feet pumping at the existence of a far greater threat.

He had a phone call to intercept.

There were no fouler words a teacher could say to a student than *I'm phoning home*. They came second only to *I'll be assigning homework over the half-term break*. Rayleigh's teacher had in fact said both statements, after school. However, it was the first that galvanized

him out of his seat as soon as detention ended and sent him running past his friends with a shouted promise to try and meet by the designated trick-or-treating spot later that All Hallows' Eve. Overhead, thunder rumbled through gray clouds; Rayleigh, clearing a zebra crossing at record speed, chanced a look upward. Across the city, lightning flashed.

Hold on. He willed the storm. Hold on.

It was a relief when Brutely Estate reared out of the fog. The high-rise was a dull-gray blight against the darkening skyline, but it was home, which forgave it most of its sins. Rayleigh endured the short elevator ride to his family's top-floor flat with a snoring Clyde. The suited man was possibly a resident in the block (though perhaps not). This afternoon, Rayleigh didn't spare his company so much as a second look. Anticipation flooded his limbs when the doors pinged open, but he was no fumbling novice. Hopping over Clyde's prone limbs, Rayleigh took his keys out before he reached his family's corner flat. He took care not to jingle them as he opened the front door. His bike and bag he abandoned in the hallway with nary a whisper. A red light flickered in warning on the answering machine his mama had installed for moments such as this. Rayleigh bet Mr. Glower had delighted in leaving a message—almost as much as Rayleigh would delight in deleting it.

"Too late, boy."

Rayleigh flinched around with a yelp of surprise.

Erect in her mobility scooter at the end of the short entrance hall, Nana fixed Rayleigh with the Look, the one responsible for her notorious reputation around the estate for not giving a hoot about whose feet, or other wayward limbs, she ran over in her scooter. "I already heard the message."

“Let’s not do anything hasty, now,” said Rayleigh, his voice smooth and sure, having recovered from her ambush. “We both know I’m your favorite grandchild.”

“By default, seeing as you’re my only grandchild.”

“I’ll take it.”

Something like a smile twitched on her mouth. “Did you really break a window?”

“It was an accident. I was participating in a class assignment.” There may have been some screaming, and furious stop-this-right-now hand waving from his history teacher, before Rayleigh’s monstrous papier-mâché boulder was fired from a rather brilliant catapult—but that was neither here nor there in the context of the conversation. “Medieval weaponry. Apparently it’s dangerous stuff.”

“Is that so?” The golden color of Nana’s eyes had faded to a watery blue over time, but a fierce heat still blazed there regardless. One that raked across her grandson’s features, probing for cracks in his well-tried armor.

“That’s so.” He wasn’t lying, exactly. He didn’t do that with his family.

Loopholes, though, he did those—*specialized* in those.

“What about the supergluing incident in science class?”

Rayleigh’s confidence slipped. Dr. Ramsey called too?

“Well, that, Nana, wasn’t my fault.”

Not entirely, anyway. While he might have spilled something on his teacher’s seat, Ramsey’s trousers seemed to like it. Enough, in any case, that they parted ways with his legs in somewhat of a hurry, Rayleigh recalled. He suppressed a grin under Nana’s scouring scrutiny.

“No? Then I think we can spare your mama the screams of an irate, and rather cold, from what I gathered, miser.” Nana leaned

over and hit the delete button, erasing the message. “I know I could have done without hearing about his exposed cheeks.”

Rayleigh’s sigh turned into a groan of deep disgust. “Where is Mama?”

“She called earlier.” Nana paused as thunder rolled outside. “The conference is running late.”

Last year Rayleigh might have whined, Again? But Mama had been working longer hours, he knew, for him. For the life she wanted him to have, in the future—away from their estate, free of elevators occupied by strange men perfumed with the stale tang of body odor and urine. Brutely had a strong community of wonderful people, but more often of late, the bad seemed to outweigh the good.

So he merely said, “Okay.”

Nana withdrew a large square envelope from the pocket of her fleecy housedress and waved it at Rayleigh until he approached her to take it. “Your mama wanted to make sure you got that.” With one touch of its gearstick, Nana turned her chair around. “And read it.”

“Thanks,” he called after her.

She paused to rotate her chair back around and repeated, “Read the card.”

An amused Rayleigh shook his head. The envelope was unremarkable. White, plain. His name was written in Mama’s neat cursive on the front, along with their address. He already knew what the card inside would say: I’ll be home soon. Be good. Keep an eye on Nana—both eyes, in fact. And the one warning Mama always included: do not go out after curfew. Rayleigh weighed the envelope in his hand. It seemed a little heavier than usual. Mama likely included a list of chores for him to complete too.

Retiring to his bedroom, Rayleigh chucked the envelope on his

bed and swiped up a sponge basketball. If he didn't open it now, technically, he wouldn't know not to meet up with his friends later, would he? Those chores would also go by unacknowledged.

He killed time practicing shots in the basket hanging behind his door. The netting whispered his victory again and again. Bowing for an imaginary audience, he considered it a good omen for the evening's trick-or-treating plans—something his phone's clock informed him it was about time for. He shot a quick message to the friends to confirm their meeting time and location. A couple minutes passed without replies. Not even from Phoebe. Small and loud, to make up for the former, she was unofficially in charge. The others usually waited until she added a message to their group chat before sending their own. No news from her must have meant everything was on as planned. Cool.

After changing into jeans and a hoodie—plus a heavier jacket, when more thunder boomed outside—Rayleigh slipped from his room with a practiced lightness of foot to check on Nana. In the living room, Nana was stationed in front of the television; a news show droned on, but her head was slumped down on her chest; soft snores rumbled through her nose. He bent his body this way and that, testing to see if she was faking it. He could never be too sure with her. But she didn't stir.

“Remember, Lights Out to Help Out is more important than ever this All Hallows' Eve,” a reporter droned. “Despite the holiday, the government's initiative to combat climate change needs you indoors after six p.m.; stay off the roads and streets to keep our energy the happy kind of blue.”

The clock that sat on the mantel beside a framed photo of his dad showed an hour till lockdown. Rayleigh had plenty of time to leave and return, sweets in hand.

“The true fright this Halloween,” the reporter continued, “is that the discovery of the alternative energy source we rely on today, known as Volence, was meant to slow climate change. But in the thirty years since its development, it has proven unreliable, leaving our city in complete darkness by six p.m.” He finished, “Keep a strong vigil out there tonight, folks. And now to Pete, with the weather.”

Nana snorted. Rayleigh froze. Waited. She didn’t wake. He backed away. Successful in his clandestine exit, he fished out the pillowcase and mask he’d stashed in his school bag last night. The stretched scarlet mouth of the clown leered up at him in triumph.

Happy All Hallows’ Eve indeed.

Before the broad face of the setting sun, the estate’s high-rises lifted from the ground like the stiff gray fingers of a giant zombie hand reaching for freedom. Fallen leaves in a spectrum of autumnal colors whispered past on a stinging breeze; with them came the loud chorus of jubilation as Brutely’s residents gathered to celebrate before the storm broke. Or the first peal from the claxons stationed around the estate could warn of the approaching curfew.

Fidgeting from one foot to the other as trick-or-treaters blustered past with fat sacks of spoils, Rayleigh scanned the costumed crowd for his friends. He’d made the meeting time, a quick check of his phone confirmed. Perhaps they’d gone on without him. They planned an elaborate prank every Hallows’ Eve. He’d never been part of it before, with Mama typically home. This was his first All Hallows’ Eve out on his own; perhaps they forgot to invite him along tonight. Or they didn’t want him there. Rayleigh had an itching suspicion that he might end up being on the receiving end of said prank. Not for the first time, he considered that *friends* might have been too



strong a term for the regulars he met in detention.

The choice to set off alone became less difficult to make.

Despite the scare tactics in the news, there was never a safer time to venture out. Residents were more vigilant, given the holiday. The government liked to believe it was the extra police officers they stationed around the city to ensure trick-or-treaters made it home before curfew. They weren't new to Brutely. Passing a trio of gossiping officers, bright headlamps strapped across their brows, Rayleigh walked a little faster. While they stood as reminders of the folly of missing curfew, there were also the times he'd seen them hauling one person or another off in the back of their cars on the estate. Naturally his mind combined both scenarios—him being hauled off *and* missing curfew.

Fighting a shudder, he headed to the part of the estate that had houses, rather than high-rises. They were mostly occupied by older people, who took pity on him when they saw he was alone, giving him an extra dip in their bowls of spoils. Others, he reckoned, felt sorry for his lack of inventive costume.

It was, admittedly, among the weakest of efforts when a variety of monsters plagued the estate.

Sporting manes of spikes or grinning with mouths of crooked fangs, they were joined by wizards with spells flying out of home-made wands and warrior princesses with tiaras, who also carried bows and arrows; several ghosts had even illuminated the underside of their sheets with white fairy lights. The best costume, though, belonged to one of the adults.

Rayleigh came to a dead stop when he spotted the Volence-Corp engineer tinkering inside a lamppost's cavity. The man's black uniform, including a thick utility belt slung across his hips, looked like



company standard issue. The large gunmetal-gray horns jutting from his wide brow and curling over his bald pate did not. Lightning flashed. In the violet light, there was something about the man that made goose bumps rise on Rayleigh's arms.

It wasn't just that he was as wide as the communal bins beside the lamppost, and tall enough to jump up and touch its rectangular bulb; coupled with the brown of his skin, as dark and rich as Rayleigh's, he looked like he'd decided to dress up as a particular Caribbean monster straight from Nana's collection of nightmarish tales, *The Book of Night Things*—a Rolling Calf. A terrible omen, in Nana's stories.

A ridiculous thought, of course.

Yet Nana's insistence that monsters were real, that she'd seen them growing up across various islands in the Caribbean, came to mind. Many of the monsters looked human, she would say. To better trick their prey. But the V-Corp employee was just a man in costume—a freakishly tall man, with a freakishly good costume. And Rayleigh was a Londoner: tough, pragmatic, in possession of very talented elbows, should he encounter something nefarious hiding in the dark. So with a defiant resolve not to listen to anything his nana said about monsters again, he moved on.

By now he was ready to rub his candy bounty in the faces of his friends—maybe not-friends, if they were planning to prank him. Either way, Rayleigh kept an eye out for them as he took the long way back to his tower block.

"Watch it!"

A body plowed into Rayleigh's with a force that stole his breath. Hands braced against his arms, but they didn't save him from slipping off the curb with a startled *oof*. And they certainly didn't save

one of his limited-edition trainers from plunging into a freezing puddle of murky water.

"You should be more careful," the voice admonished.

"You're telling me that?" Anguished, he tore his mask from his face and gaped at the small, warm-brown-skinned girl who'd crashed into him. "Who has the wet foot here?"

Almond-shaped eyes dipped; she winced. "Let me make it up to you." Her accent was distinctly north of London. She was a tourist.

They were known far and wide to be a tricky sort.

"I'm good," said Rayleigh. And he was. If good meant about to combust. "I need to get home." If he had a hope of rescuing his trainer, he had to leave ASAP.

Limping away from the girl, he freed his afro pick from his jacket pocket, and restored the height to his hair the mask crushed. If only fixing his trainer was so easy. Dogged by an uncomfortable awareness of the warming puddle water now oozing between his toes, he hurried toward the alley that would take him home fastest. Wedged between a line of garages and the windowless side of the first Brutely high-rise, the solitary streetlamp didn't do much against the darkness. Or sudden influx of fog. Mama hated him walking there. Her words of warning rang clear in his head when footfalls sounded behind him, echoing off the cracked concrete, graffitied wall, and corrugated metal that gave Brutely its reputation as one of the ugliest estates this side of the Thames.

"Thought I'd walk back with you!"

Surprised, Rayleigh spun, wet sock squelching in his sodden trainer. It was that girl. Again.

She jogged toward him with all the subtlety of a traveling percussion section, layered against the season's bite in her oversized leather

jacket and stomping combat boots.

“It’s close to curfew, and you seem to know where you’re going.” She panted.

“Home.” He shoved his afro pick back into his side pocket. “My home.”

“That’s fine.” Hitching up beside him, she continued with, “I don’t know anywhere around here. I’m visiting.”

Rayleigh couldn’t help snorting. “Why?” Regardless of the evening’s high spirits, the estate housed more than a few individuals who did worse things than ruin a hot pair of trainers like this girl. There was a gang notorious for pinning people down to steal the kicks right off their feet.

“Well . . .” Her grin was sudden. A real jack-o’-lantern leer that curled the corners of her mouth up. “I came here—”

A patrol helicopter chose that moment to whirr overhead; its bright spotlight doused the estate in a happy blue light.

“What did you say?” Rayleigh hollered over the din.

“I said—” The girl whipped a length of rope out of her pocket and looped it around Rayleigh’s left wrist. “I came here for you.”

# TWO

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## THE MONSTER UNDER THE SOFA BED



Rayleigh's first instinct, much to the girl's surprise, was to start laughing. Thunder followed in a riotous echo. "Which one of the crew put you up to this, then? Phoebe?"

"Nope. None of them." She said, wicked smile still in place, "Last I checked, they were all a little . . . tied up. Especially that Phoebe. She had a right gob on her."

The evening, heavy under a mantle of fog and the threat of more rain, became weightier still.

Phoebe's cheek was the best and worst part about her. Everyone on the estate knew that. But this girl said she was visiting. How would she know?

"Since you're wondering, yes," the tourist continued. "I meant tied up literally."

"I wasn't," Rayleigh said. But he was now. There was something about the look in the girl's eye, a glint of confidence Rayleigh knew he often bore himself, that left no room for disbelief, but plenty for confusion. "Who are you?"

"I'll be asking the questions tonight."

"Is that so." He kept his voice light, but disquiet squatted on his chest. She clearly wasn't after his trainers, having ruined one earlier. Maybe it was his candy she'd set her sights on. There was always a gang of kids roaming the estate on All Hallows' Eve, determined to steal spoils from unwitting trick-or-treaters. Either this girl was one of them or she was lying about Phoebe. She might be his friends' big prank. "How about you get on with it, then, North? I have places to be."

"Glad to," the girl said. "Where's your dad?"

Rayleigh blinked, confused. She'd have had more success asking him to name the international dish of Switzerland.

"No clue. Haven't seen him in ages."

"Liar-liar." The girl snatched at the rope, making him wince. "Tell me the truth."

"I swear." Rayleigh was actually being honest. And with a stranger he could have lied to, no less.

Aside from the yearly birthday and holiday cards from Robert Mann, Rayleigh had nothing to do with his father, and hadn't since he was a baby. Mama and Nana said his work for V-Corp kept him away. He was a big-shot manager for the various energy factories that powered London—soon the world, its founder, Luther Volence, promised.

Volence was as secretive as it was dangerous. Rayleigh had tried asking, begging even, to see his dad, but no luck. Eventually, he'd accepted that he had his mama and Nana. They were more than enough.

"Why d'you want to know?" he asked the strange girl, North, his brows lowering. Parents weren't something he discussed with his detention crew.

“You can’t answer a question with a question,” she hit back.

“I think you’ll find you can’t tie strangers up either.”

“Look.” She rolled her shoulders, gearing up for a fight, by the looks of things. Rayleigh reared back, wary of this off girl. “We can do this the easy way, or—” She opened the right side of her jacket, revealing a bum bag.

And just like that, Rayleigh’s wariness was replaced by loud laughter. It condensed in the evening air like a mocking specter, a third participant in their odd little party.

“Or what? You’ll lob your *fanny pack* at me?” Kids around the world knew the difference between being branded Fashionable or Parent on Holiday was the placement of a bum bag. Across the body was clearly the right way to carry one. Around the waist it became a fanny pack, and who wanted to be known for carrying one of those?

Being a tourist wasn’t the worst of it. No doubt the girl was deranged too. He’d feel bad for her, if his left wrist wasn’t beginning to chafe beneath her rope. While North harped on about whatever she had stuffed in that bag around her waist, Rayleigh took a surreptitious assessment of his surroundings. Finding Phoebe would put an end to her rubbish prank. Alas, he didn’t see anywhere she might have hidden to watch her prank unfold. In fact, shadows thick enough to dim the reach of the alley’s lone streetlamp loomed with menace. It was difficult to see much at all—until one pulled away from the others, twanged like a soundless piece of elastic, mammoth horns first.

“Wotcher.”

The cockney hello echoed down the alley. The accent was that of a typical East End geezer, full of charm and swagger, and entirely

no-nonsense. The girl stopped midsentence and whirled toward it. Her long dark curls whipped Rayleigh in the face.

“All right there?” It was the engineer from earlier, striding toward the duo with a seesawing gait that was all elbows and shoulders. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Let me guess, he’s here because you probably pushed him into a puddle too,” Rayleigh said tetchily. His left eye was sore and watering from the girl’s hair. Though that pain was soon eclipsed by the sudden wail of the estate’s claxons.

Boy, girl, and horned stranger stilled.

Brutely’s curfew notification wasn’t the quick peal of an emergency vehicle’s siren, or even the annoying trill of a fire alarm. It was the deep throb of a funeral dirge, the insidious plod of something heavy making its way through the approaching dark.

In half an hour, another warning would sound.

After that, there would be no more.

“He’s not here for me.” North’s voice was hoarse.

“Well, he’s not here for me either. But I’ll do the talking,” Rayleigh decided, the warning ringing in his ears. The engineer was between him and his flat. Him and safety—him and *sanity*. “I’ll make him leave.”

“You won’t go with your Snatcher?” the girl asked.

Rayleigh gasped at her. “I know you’re not from here, North, but in this city, we don’t go off with anyone we don’t know. Especially not Snatchers. We run. Sometimes we run and yell. Loudly.”

“My name’s Marley, not North.” Her frank appraisal turned to surprise, as though she was seeing him for the first time. “You don’t know anything, do you?”



An indignant Rayleigh was waylaid from telling her how much he did in fact know by the weighty tread of the horned man. Wind puffed through the mouth of the alley, knighting the stranger with an eerie cloak of brume. Something that wasn't helping to contest his monster-like appearance, it had to be noted. Especially since he wore a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses. Anyone sporting those at night was begging to be treated with suspicion.

Facing him, Rayleigh squared his shoulders. "You're the bloke from the bins."

The engineer stopped short. "That's . . . not how I'm often remembered, I must say."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I've never seen you anywhere else."

"Pretty!" He clapped two massive hands. "That's more like it. Though I tend to prefer handsome, dashing."

"Speaking of dashing," muttered Marley, giving the length of rope a tug.

The stranger's focus shifted to her. "And who are you?"

"I'm a friend."

"Not one of mine," Rayleigh said.

Marley cut a look his way. "I could have been," she muttered.

"And since we're not friends either, little one—" The stranger's manner transformed from loose and cordial to tight and watchful as he addressed Marley. He unclipped a long metal cylinder from his belt. "I think it's time you make like a leaf."

"I wouldn't, Snatcher," Marley singsonged, a hand on that fanny pack and the threat of insurgence emblazoned across her brow. "I'm not going anywhere without what I came here for."

Somewhere between being impressed and baffled, Rayleigh

assessed his odd companion anew. She didn't seem older than his twelve years. Though she did have a sort of rough and ready look about her that he was without. Country versus city. Perhaps it was the beat-up old jacket. It made her look like a girl who'd lived and wasn't afraid of what the world had in store. Where had his friends found her? But, more importantly, what did he have to do to lose her?

"This is the only time I'll ask." A streak of brilliant white energy erupted from inside the stranger's canister. It sparked and crackled like a bolt of the lightning that zigzagged through the fog at his back; its tip was honed into a merciless point, like—like a *sword*. "Step away from the boy."

Rayleigh flung his tied wrists over his eyes to combat the weapon's dazzle—an honest to goodness sword. In East London. Hang on. Did the man say "the boy"? Him? He wanted to help *him*? Help him into the back of a van, Rayleigh would bet.

Instead of doing as ordered, Marley sprang forward and launched a small vial from her right hand. With a lazy grace, the sword rose to meet it. Whatever was thrown burned away in an explosion of purple smoke, the kind seen in movies or wafting from cars filled with teenagers parked up in one of Brutely Estate's lots.

"You missed." The man took a step forward, and—stopped, froze, like someone had hit a remote and paused him.

Rayleigh understood why people rubbed their eyes when faced with something unbelievable. It didn't help, though. Not the first time, or the second.

Marley dusted off her hands. "They never think to look at their feet."

Shattered glass sparkled around the stranger's boots from a

second vial; a soft gray smoke slinked up his legs, his torso. It twined itself around his arms, neck, head, and horns. Denser than the fog, it moved with the predatory elegance of a python, and seemed to have trapped him in his immovable state. Eyes rubbed raw by now, Rayleigh blinked, stupefied. He had to admit this was way too elaborate a prank for the crew from detention to pull off. They couldn't be trusted to hold a pencil the correct way up, if one end didn't have an eraser.

Who were these people?

"We need to leave before he can—" Marley halted in surprise when she clearly didn't find the rope in hand—or Rayleigh, whose legs, as it so happened, were just as talented as his elbows.

Much as the engineer hadn't watched his feet, she too had been distracted enough to let something important slip from her hands. Rayleigh.

Devouring the last twenty meters or so to his high-rise door, he whipped his keys out and slammed the fob against the sensor. Throwing his body through, he flung it shut behind him.

Moments later, Marley grabbed the handle and gave it a vicious tug. "I saved you!" She banged her fists against the glass. "Let me in!"

"That was cool, whatever it was—" It was also weird. "But I'd go now if I were you." He pointed over her shoulder; his pillowcase of treats swung in his grip. The girl looked back at the stranger, who was stirring—thawing like a prehistoric relic warmed by a ray of sunlight.

Landing a look at Rayleigh that promised a continuance, she bolted into the night.

Before the horned man spotted him, Rayleigh split too. By the time he made it to the door of his flat, adrenaline had given way to

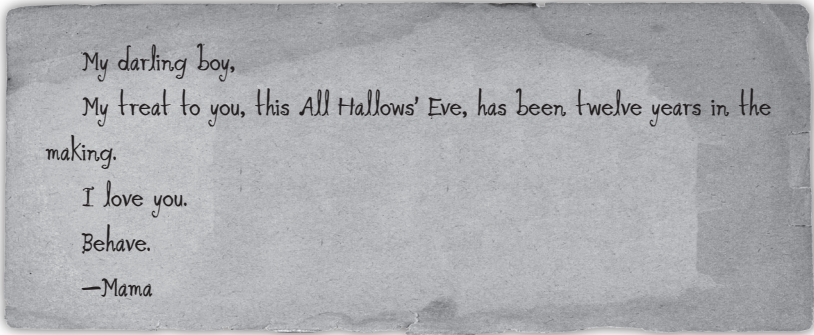
the shakes. He opened and closed his left fist. It was slightly numb. What happened had to be a case of mistaken identity, a Halloween prank meant for someone else, orchestrated by someone with far more talent than Phoebe and the others. Elaborate, and rather cool, it almost made him wish he paid more attention to Dr. Ramsey during science class.

In the flat's hallway, Rayleigh paused before the sideboard. Mama's envelope, the one he'd left on his bed, was now propped up against the overflowing basket of mail. Frowning, he took it up and proceeded to the front room—where he found something else amiss. Nana was gone; in her place before the television, a hulking stranger was seated.

Forget Halloween being affiliated with night of the living dead. Rayleigh was experiencing a night of never-ending strangers. Had he forgotten they were having guests over? He glanced back down the hallway. Nana's umbrella, the one she used to knock objects down from shelves in shops, was gone. She disliked guests as much as he did. But to leave him alone with them? They had an unspoken pact when it came to friends and family who stayed far too long, ate way too much, and never seemed to take the hint when it was time to go. Stick together. Always.

Quietly, so as not to give himself away to the stranger, he slipped a finger beneath the envelope's seal. Perhaps Mama wrote to tell him about their guest. Two slips of thick paper fell out of a folded card. The first looked like an invitation to some sort of ceremony during his half-term break. He skipped over that, allergic to anything vaguely institutional while on holiday. The second slip was a diagram of a kid who looked a lot like Rayleigh falling down a

dark chute. He paused on that, his bottom lip between his teeth as he tried to work out what it meant. Giving up (any activity that required serious brain power was also to be ignored until half-term break was over), Rayleigh opened the card; it was as plain as the envelope. Inside it read:



My darling boy,  
My treat to you, this All Hallows' Eve, has been twelve years in the making.  
I love you.  
Behave.  
—Mama

Frown deepening, Rayleigh's eyes shifted to the question mark in the leather jacket seated in the front room. Suspicion felt as uncomfortable as the dirty water in his trainer.

Were they being burgled?

Albeit by a thief who preferred streaming over ransacking the place in search of nonexistent family jewels. What a night. Trouble: it was like Rayleigh couldn't help attracting it in waves. Shoving the contents of Mama's envelope in his pocket, he retreated into the hall for the landline, his focus never straying from the stranger, who was laughing at something on the TV. And not quietly either, the brazen swindler. When Rayleigh's back hit the wall, it was with a certain amount of relish that he hit the speed dial for one of their downstairs neighbors. Big Paul was a minor celebrity in the lucha libre world, and a personal friend of Nana's. With his wrestling skills, he'd have this thief sorted in a—

A hairy hand seized the phone from over his shoulder. “What’s this, then?”

Rayleigh wheeled around, a shout trapped in his throat.

What he’d assumed to be a wall was, in fact, a second burglar. The lurcher turned the phone over in their large hands. They were coated in hair that was twin in color to the first burglar’s—*he* was coated in it—but unlike his counterpart in front of the television, he was wearing nothing else. Was he supposed to be a yeti? Bigfoot? Small, dark eyes narrowed behind a mask so realistic, it was creepy.

“Do you know,” breathed Rayleigh, “I think they were calling for you.”

The burglar’s eyes dipped to the phone; Rayleigh made a break for the door.

“Not so fast.”

Rayleigh choked as his hoodie cut into his neck. His fingers scrabbled to separate fabric from skin, but the burglar reeled him in by his hood with quick, sharp tugs that cut off his air.

“Hey, Wrong! Get off your lazy butt, I’ve got him.”

The television clicked off; thudding footsteps made their way to the hall. Spots danced across Rayleigh’s vision as his eyes bounced between the thieves, widening. They were twins. Identically costumed Bigfoots—Bigfeet?

Rayleigh reared back as they both leaned in and sniffed him. “Hey!”

The one without the jacket nodded, confident. “This is the kid Marley’s been following.”

*North.*

Rayleigh might have snarled.

“She’s carried his scent home. Trust me, I’m Right.”

“Yes, you are.”

Laughing like a pair of jack-in-the-boxes, they slapped a high five. Before Rayleigh could make it clear he had nothing to do with tourists, his front door opened. Marley stepped inside.

Flashing him a quick censoring look, she addressed his captors. “He’s not the one you’re looking for.”

Rayleigh’s face went slack. So she was in on whatever this was with whoever these people were. But not with the stranger outside. The horned man who also wanted him, for some reason. Rayleigh’s head was beginning to spin.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“You sure?” Wrong asked Marley, ignoring Rayleigh.

“Nah,” his twin returned. “Sure’s our cousin. This is Marley, our little sis. And as our little sis, sis, we know when you’re lying.”

There was a moment of tense stillness. Rayleigh eyed the Bigfeet and Marley, their sister, apparently. Her hand crept toward her fanny pack, but the twins were faster. One lunged forward and grabbed her by the scruff of her leather jacket.

“Especially since we already know you’re a *thief*. This is mine!” The twin tried for the fanny pack around her waist; Marley kicked out and caught him on the elbow with one of her boots. He roared in pain. “I say we bring them both in!”

“And I say, you’re not Wrong.”

“No, I’m Right.”

Rayleigh bared his teeth at Marley while her brothers fell about laughing, again. This madness was her fault. Some odd family affair he, for reasons beyond his understanding, had been drawn into.



“What is going on?” he bellowed.

“We were getting to that, little Mann,” said the leather-jacket-wearing twin. “Tell us, where’s your dad?”

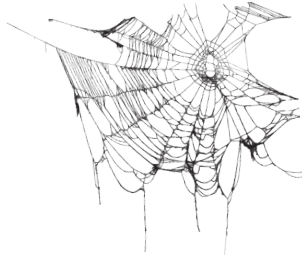
There was a grinding clash of metal against metal; the sofa bed in the front room opened upward like a yawning mouth. From the new opening, the horned man from the alley stepped out and into view, peeling a stray sock from one of his horns as casually as one might remove a piece of lint.

“Why don’t you raspberry tarts try picking on someone your own . . . ah.” His impressive height was rendered almost normal before the Bigfoot burglars. “No matter. It’s not the size that counts, it’s how you use it.” And with that, he pointed his metal canister at the twins and fired two fizzing orbs of light.

# THREE

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## DON'T SCREAM



Right dived with a yelp. Freed, Rayleigh threw himself onto the runner and shielded his head with his arms. The orbs smashed through the wall overhead. Plaster and paint rained down like shrapnel. Number thirty's dog started barking down the hall; it was fast joined by flat twenty-eight's.

"You all right, Nephew-mine?"

"Nephew what?" coughed Rayleigh, looking up.

The horned man charged through the dust haze. "Wasn't there some kind of card that explained who I am?"

"Never mind that now. Hurry up and *move*." Marley hoisted Rayleigh up and away from her brothers as they untangled their long limbs and clambered onto hairy feet.

"You made a mistake coming here, Grandpa," one of them jeered. Possibly Right, though their decision making was decidedly wrong, before the stranger with the weapon.

"Grandpa?" The man chuckled. "Clearly I did make a mistake. I was ready for a real fight, not a pitiful attempt at bruising my ego."

In the same casual manner that he seemed to do everything else, he fired a single ball of light from his weapon. It caught Right in the stomach. He flew back down the hall and crashed through the front door in an explosion of wood. “Pillock,” the man muttered.

“Hey!” Rayleigh shouted. “You’re ruining my flat!”

The man winced. “Everything is under control. Mostly.”

“Oh, yeah?” Still standing, Wrong reached into a fanny pack like Marley’s around his waist and unleashed a slim vial. He popped the cork, and aubergine smoke oozed out. Slinking down the container’s sides, it coalesced into something spindly and sharp that stood on two feet—a creature of smoke and nightmares. Emerald eyes glinted in its cheap impression of a face, one that swirled and eddied like a storm cloud as it advanced with slow, careful steps.

Rayleigh’s instinct, hardened by city living though it was, told him to make a run for it. Something weird was going on, and he wanted no part of it.

“Nephew-mine,” said the horned man, tossing his canister from his left to right hand. “Do you recognize this beast?”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Well, do you?”

Nana’s *Book of Night Things* might have had a similar illustration, he thought. So what?

“You expect me to believe that thing’s a monster?”

“As much of a monster as I am.” The man cocked his head to the side, sunglasses flashing. “But then, you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Gooseflesh pimpled across Rayleigh’s skin.

He thought back to the lamppost outside; how eerie the engineer had looked in the fog. His feeling of unease took on a new significance

in his flat that was currently filled with strangers wielding things he could only explain as . . . unexplainable. He was beginning to think, however wild, however mad, that they weren't wearing costumes.

"We're out of time for reading, gov." The lightning sword from the alley snarled its way into existence from the man's canister. In the Mann family's humble flat, it seemed even bigger and more threatening, as otherworldly as the beast on clawed feet before them. "These interlopers shouldn't be here. Me on the other hand, I'm here on behalf of your old man."

Rayleigh felt the blood drain from his face. That made three mentions of Robert Mann in one night.

"He wants to see you."

"He does?"

"Sorry. I think there's been a mistake," the twin still standing said, with no small amount of awkwardness. "This is a Snatching?"

"What did you think it was?" the man asked.

"Not that. Let me just—I'll recork the thing. Yeah. We have a few more seconds before it attacks. I didn't mean to get in the way of your work, man."

"I'll get to you and your pet in a moment," the horned stranger said, with no small amount of irritation, before turning back to Rayleigh. "Will you trust me, Nephew-mine?"

"Trust you?" His voice was hoarse with disbelief. "I don't even know who you are. Who any of you are!"

"Get down!"

At Marley's shout, Rayleigh ducked. A clawed hand sank into the wall where his head had been with a hollow thud. He twisted away and surged to his feet. Growling, the creature from the vial had

finally come fully alive, snapping a jaw filled with sharp little teeth as it fought to free itself from Sheetrock.

“Oh—that’s not supposed to happen.” The twin fumbled with the bottle, the cork.

“Because it’s not a genie! For fright’s sake. Clear out of it!” Lethal as a tank, the horned man drove in. The smoky monster lashed out with its free hand. It caught him in the face. His head snapped to the side so fast his glasses flew off and clattered against the floor, breaking with a crunch of glass and metal. He rallied with a chuckle. Dodging another swipe, the man moved in low. Swinging his weapon up in a powerful arc, he sliced through the creature; light defeated darkness too fast for the monster to scream. If indeed it was a monster. Rayleigh didn’t know which way was up anymore.

“Definitely made a mistake.” Wrong winced. “I think I’ll—I’ll see myself out.” He took one look at the slain beast, twitching its way to a silent death, and hightailed it down the hallway.

“That’s your first sensible decision of the evening!” the man called after him.

“You coming, Marley?” the twin asked, framed by the wreckage that was the front door.

“Not with you two idiots.”

Shrugging, he tucked his arms under his comatose brother’s armpits and dragged him down the hall. “We were only trying to help,” he explained, dark eyes flickering between Rayleigh and the horned man, whose weapon was still aloft, before he disappeared from view.

“Help with what?”

In answer to Rayleigh’s question, Marley rolled her eyes over to the horned man, who scoffed.

“My question exactly,” he said. “What do you get with two pillocks?” With the click of a button, his sword withdrew. “Nothing but a headache. Honestly, Hallows’ Eve brings all kinds of weirdos to the fore,” he stated, as though he wasn’t one of many weirdos Rayleigh had encountered this evening. “Now then, you wondered who I am, Nephew-mine?”

Rayleigh sucked in a sharp lungful of air as the man looked his way. His eyes were a deep gold, a brown touched by perpetual sunlight—just like Rayleigh’s own.

Like the fierce eyes of his father in the photo on the mantel.

“Thelonious Tickle, at your service.” He bowed his head. “Ick to my enemies and exes, but to my admirers, Chief of the Terrors, Second-Class Eldritch Honors, and Patron to the One-Horned League of Creatures and Critters. Pleased to meet you, kid, at long last.”

Rayleigh could only stare at those eyes, at the thick eyebrows above them that he too sported; at the quirk of a mouth so like Nana’s—his paternal grandparent. This man was so close to the picture of Robert Mann on the mantel, Rayleigh might have been convinced it was him, had he not introduced himself as someone else. His uncle. Rayleigh’s heart was thumping in his chest, hard enough that he wondered if the man could hear it along with the thunder outside.

“Was it the titles?” Thelonious took another pair of mirrored aviators from one of his pockets and put them on. “They can be a bit of a mouthful.” He scratched the tip of his left horn. “Though I suppose they might have been in your mama’s card.”

“They weren’t.”

“No? Thought Drea might have mentioned me at least. Nothing about the horns?”

“Where is Mama? Nana? And my dad, you said—you said he wants to see me?”

“Whoa.” Thelonious raised his hands. “The first two are safe. A Snatching’s easier without the human guardians around. Not to mention without *my* mother being around. And your dad—”

“I’m sorry. A what?”

“Told you he was a Snatcher,” muttered Marley.

Thelonious cringed. “I suppose this isn’t a good time to circle back to that question about trust?”

“Hate to break up the family reunion.” Marley leveled a finger down the hallway. “They’re not supposed to do that, are they?”

The quivering halves of the creature had graduated to violent jerks. An arm shot free from its wounded side with a squelch, pungent bodily fluids splashing. Rayleigh and Marley recoiled. The monster was growing out of its halves, regenerating.

“No clue.” Thelonious frowned. “Come this way.” The children were ushered further down the hall off the front room, which led to the bedrooms. “Mind giving us a bit of space?” Thelonious asked Marley. Looking from him to the monsters, she scowled, took a small step away, and turned her back. “All right, Nephew-mine, this might sound strange, even unbelievable—actually, it’s probably not that hard to catch on to after the night you’ve been having. Look, as long as there have been humans—”

“There have been monsters?” Dazed, Rayleigh shook his head. “That’s from Nana’s *Book of Night Things*.”

“It is. If the old bird’s been reading that with you, then you’ll know all cultures have their own creatures of the moon, monsters of the night, beasties of the shadows. What you won’t know is that most



of them call subterranean cities in the Confederation of Lightless Places home—most of us, that is.” He bowed his head. “You buying what I’m selling?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Monsters don’t exist.” Though his words were stated with a calm surety, Rayleigh couldn’t help looking sideways in the direction of the regenerating creatures in the hall. “They can’t. If they did—”

“Rulers around the world would make up excuses to introduce curfews? Ones that keep people inside at night? They’d put out special bobbies on the beat, headlamps strapped across their brows, to keep watch in the dark?”

“The patrols and curfews are to preserve energy and keep us safe from darkness,” insisted Rayleigh. “They keep us safe from the idiots taking advantage of the darkness. That’s what the prime minister said.”

“Which?”

“What?”

“Which one did he say? Are you keeping out of the darkness, or are you avoiding criminals?”

“Both? I don’t know. I’m *twelve*.”

“Twelve or not, I thought you’d know better,” Thelonious mused. “Criminals are the least of London’s worries once the sun goes down. I thought, if the old bird’s been reading you the stories, you wouldn’t rely on what you’re being told. You’d trust what’s in there.” He touched Rayleigh’s forehead. “Because I know you’ve wondered about that itch. The one satisfied by mischief and mayhem. By the supersized catapults and superglue. Didn’t you ever want to know where that monstrous urge to create chaos came from? It isn’t the sort

of thing born from light, Nephew-mine. *Thems that do know what it means to walk in the dark.*”

Further arguments staled on Rayleigh’s tongue.

What was it Mr. Glower said when he told him off earlier? *Wrong will always be wrong.* Mama was formidable, there was no doubt about it, but she exuded warmth and smiled in a way that made others reciprocate. Most teachers frowned when Rayleigh came around. A few even cried when they faced the entirety of his detention crew. Rayleigh knew long ago that whatever miscreant bone he had that attracted trouble, craved it sometimes, wasn’t from Mama.

“If you’re a monster, a monster,” he said, the words heavy and awkward between his lips, “is Nana?” Thelonious nodded with an encouraging smile. “And my dad?”

“He is too.”

Rayleigh’s stomach twisted itself into knots a sailor would have been proud of. In *The Book of Night Things*, monsters, no matter whether they were from the Caribbean, or elsewhere, were agents of shadow and misery who enjoyed tormenting their enemies. If his dad’s side of the family were all monsters . . . well, it certainly gave new meaning to Nana’s dark cackle at being known as that demon on wheels around the estate.

It also stood to pattern that Rayleigh was a monster too.

He couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud.

“Why so glum, gov?” Thelonious asked. “Is it the whole ‘monsters are evil’ thing? Listen, we aren’t all the wicked beings stories present us as.”

“He’s not lying,” Marley pitched in over her shoulder. “They scare kids straight, so they don’t grow up to become real-life monsters, like

murderers or grown-ups who wear sandals with socks. Might not look like it with those horns,” she said, sending a disparaging look Thelonious’s way. “But they’re the good guys.”

“And your old man?” added Thelonious. “He’s *the* good guy.”

A discordant assault of snarls drew their attention back to the severed monsters.

The monsters held themselves aloft on spindly arms, jaws snapping. A tiny stubby leg stretched itself into being from both halves, oozing something foul over the runner.

“Oh, yeah,” murmured Rayleigh. “Regular heroes they are.”

“Not them. Your old man is, though. And I can prove it to you, but we’re kind of against the wire here, Nephew-mine. There’ll be plenty of time for stories once we get below pavement. Will you trust me on that?”

Rayleigh took a long, hard look at the man—his uncle. “You’re serious about all this?”

“As a Knickerbocker Glory with two cherries on top.”

Rayleigh gave himself permission to think about that bridge. The one he always imagined between him and his dad. Something like happiness bloomed in his chest. His dad hadn’t avoided him his entire life. He was a good guy, a hero.

People who looked like Rayleigh and his family weren’t seen as heroes, traditionally. And kids like him definitely weren’t heroes. The word hummed, pulsating with possibility—with promise. It sparked through Rayleigh’s skin, his bones, crackling in his fingertips like something he could shape and hold.

“Nephew-mine?”

Meeting his dad must have been what Mama’s strange bundle

of cards alluded to. The man whose absence she'd always explained away; the man he'd wondered about from time to time; enough that, now he had the chance, he wanted to see. Very much. While he didn't want to leave Mama and Nana, they had practically given him permission to go. And he'd be back. Right?

"I'll be back, right?" he checked.

"Whenever you want. You can see your mama, the old bird. Your friends too," Thelonious added.

*His friends.* "Hey, did you really tie them up?" he asked Marley.

"The rope isn't tight," she said over her shoulder. "They can get free. They might be already."

They hadn't stood Rayleigh up after all. But that didn't change the fact that he wouldn't have been surprised if they had. He'd never wanted a fresh start away from them, but now it was here and, with it, a chance to see his dad—it was time to cross the bridge.

"I'll come," he told Thelonious. "But only if I get the full story as soon as we get below . . . pavement?"

"Below-London. And yes, of course. Tip top!" Thelonious clapped his hands. "Now, do you have a washing hamper, or an underbed space?"

"Hello!" Marley turned, arms splayed. "What about me?"

That was a good point. "Why are you still here?" Rayleigh asked.

"Yeah. Didn't you hear me earlier?" Thelonious waved goodbye. "Hit the road, kid."

"I just helped you out, Mr. Tickle, and I saved you from my brothers, Rayleigh."

"You brought them to me," Rayleigh corrected her. "Get home safe now."

Exasperated, Marley turned to Thelonious. "With all due respect,

you can't leave those monsters here."

Almost entirely whole, the monsters watched them with wicked eyes from down the hallway, as if weighing up the best course of attack after the failed first round.

"And you can't let Rayleigh travel to Below-London alone. It's his first time. He could end up anywhere."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Rayleigh defended himself. "I've taken the tube before."

Thelonious sighed. "Actually, she's got a point there, gov."

An incandescent triumph blazed across Marley's heart-shaped face.

"London's transport system only spans the city," Thelonious went on to say. "The system you'll be taking is the Vol-way. It connects countries around the world. You two go on ahead. I'll meet you both as soon as I'm done here. You got that, girl?" Thelonious's expression grew stern. "Don't make me come looking for you." Blanching, Marley nodded. "Take the West Begetter Vol-way." He dug a hand in his jacket pocket and tossed a coin to each child. "You'll need these."

Rayleigh turned it over in his palm. Hexagonal, its silver center was bordered with rose gold. *Vol-trix Token—Admission 1* was incised across its middle. A profile of a bald man—who might also be the cousin of a walrus, considering the gigantic tusks—graced its back.

"Get on with you, now." Thelonious took up position in the center of the hallway, facing down the monsters. The sword barreled out of the canister once more. Lowering his horns, he dragged a booted foot back once, twice.

The last thing Rayleigh saw before slamming his bedroom door shut was his new uncle breaking into a run. Thelonious's sword spun before him in a sparking cyclone. Strangest of all, he wore a half smile on his face.

“Let’s get out of here,” Marley breathed, with an air of relief.

“Give me a minute.” Reaching for the afro pick he kept on his bedside table, Rayleigh sank down on his bed and ran through his hair with slow, measured movements. It was how he thought best. Something slid into his thigh—*The Book of Night Things*. Pausing the comb, he picked it up; the weighted ends of its ribbon book-marks clacked rhythmically against one another. When his dad was a boy, its cover might have been a rich indigo, the letters gold foil. Over the years the grandeur had peeled and faded, replaced by the worn look of something that was well loved—or often consulted.

The stories and legends were scribed by hand, different hands, making it more of a record than a book of fairy tales. More than one person had captured stories; some even added illustrations. He’d never considered that some of them could have been written by his dad. Nana must have left the book in his room, knowing what the evening would bring for him. But then . . . why hadn’t he?

Why hadn’t he known about his dad, his monstrous heritage, any of it?

In fact, where was his dad? Why wasn’t he the one picking Rayleigh up?

“You don’t need to pack anything,” said Marley as she rooted through the junk on a dresser. “None of this stuff will be any good Below.”

Approaching a stage of thinking that required him to be on his feet, mobile, Rayleigh sprang up. “So are you a monster too?” he asked, making sure his phone was secured in his back pocket.

“Mostly,” was her answer. “Does that freak you out?”

“I’d say it fits.”

Marley's forehead wrinkled, like she couldn't tell if he was insulting her or not.

Rayleigh wasn't sure either. Still ticking things over, he changed into his lucky leopard-print socks and stuffed his feet into his second-favorite pair of trainers. The pair he wore tonight would be left to ruin. A shame. No, a crime. One that couldn't be helped.

Despite what Marley said about his Above-London stuff, he grabbed a small backpack and threw *The Book of Night Things* inside; he also packed his pillowcase of treats and a couple picks for his hair.

He glanced around his room one last time. He'd never traveled away from home before. Outside he could hear the clash and crash of furniture, suggesting there wouldn't be much left of it when he returned—because he would. He was only going to meet his dad, the good guy. So good, in fact, that he'd sent his brother to collect the son he hadn't seen in twelve years instead of going himself.

"It's best not to think." Marley waved a contemplative Rayleigh over to the hamper. "You have your token? Toss it inside."

A second after it landed in the basket, the clothing began to swirl around the coin, slowly at first and then faster until they twisted their way into a vortex of shadows. A warm breeze blustered up and out of the wicker basket. The air in the room crackled with a storm-like energy. Rayleigh clenched his shaking fists, willed his heart to calm its drum solo.

"West Begetter Vol-way," instructed Marley, in a clear voice. "Right, keep your arms folded across your chest in an X; jumping from one place to another via Vol-ways tends to produce a velocity that will rip any wayward limbs from their sockets."

"What?"



“Arms!”

Rayleigh gripped both shoulders. “Just—hang on!”

“Don’t worry. Vol-way commuters hardly break bones anymore. They fixed the gravitational pull.”

“We’ll come back to that,” Rayleigh remarked, eyes darting to the clothing hamper. “Look, is it weird that my dad wants to see me but isn’t here?”

Edging around the hamper, Marley didn’t say anything.

“You came to London looking for him, so did your brothers.” His mind, a marvel to few and a menace to most, built a puzzle that was a few pieces short. “If everyone’s looking for him . . . where is he?” He turned to look at where Marley now stood at his back, twisting her mouth like she was chewing on a secret. “Was he meant to be picking me up? Hey—is that man, Thelonious, really my uncle?”

“Yes.”

“Yes to which?” His eyes narrowed. “What do you know?”

“Only that you shouldn’t scream,” she said. “You never know what you might wake.”

And with that, she shoved him squarely in his side.

With his arms folded, Rayleigh was unable to steady himself. Startled, he toppled sideways too fast to yell as the washing basket gaped open and swallowed him whole.